

If He Had Come

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Summary: Jason Todd has been a prisoner of the Joker for nine months. Then, against all odds and all hope, Batman rescues Jason and brings him back to Wayne Manor to recover. But has Batman come too late to save what is left of Jason? (AU of the Arkham Knight video game)

1. Chapter 1

It's been nine months.

He's been beaten, tortured, and degraded in more ways than he thought humanly possible. He no longer remembers what it feels like to wear clothes that aren't covered in grim and blood, sticking to his open wounds. He doesn't remember what it felt like to be able to move even the smallest limb without excruciating pain blazing through him. His skin is always cold and clammy, his eyes bloodshot, and his hair greasy and matted. He doesn't recall what it was like to be clean, to be whole.

Yet somehow, this newest pain is the worst. As the Joker stands over him, pressing a scalding iron into his cheek, Jason cannot bite back the horrible scream that is torn from his lips. The branding iron holds his head in place, so he cannot turn away from the sadistic grin leering down at him. His scream mixes in with Joker's deranged laughter, and the sound is more awful than any of Jason's relentless nightmares.

It's not the physical pain that makes this the worst thing Joker has done – he's gone through other tortures that have equaled it in that. It's the fact that now he can never be truly free from this horror. If by some miracle he ever does manage to escape this hell, it won't matter. The mark on his face will always be there to remind him of everything that has happened. Of the fact that he belongs to the Joker. Even if he does escape, the Joker will forever own his mind and soul.

It's this realization that makes Jason's scream continue on. Birthed from pain, the scream turns to one of denial and horror as the truth dawns on him. He is forever tainted, and anyone who sees his face now will know that.

He is so consumed by this thought that at first he doesn't even realize that Joker had pulled the brand away. The searing pain continues though, and now the cool air of the room brushes against the wound, stinging it. Jason flinches and moans pitifully, his eyes half-closed and unfocused as he lies limp and sprawled across the filthy floor.

"Well, that was fun!" the Joker exclaims cheerfully. "I must say, this is a vast improvement â€" you look _much _better than you did before, trust me! Plus, now if I happen to lose you, whoever finds you will know exactly who to return you to!" The Joker swung the cooling iron brand around in the air, whistling happily. "I'd love to stay, but unfortunately, I have some other things to attend to." Jason doesn't move. The Joker's grin only widens and he waves his hands in a mockingly polite gesture. "Please, don't get up; I'll just see myself out. Ta-ta!"

Jason continues to stare at the far wall, his gaze blank. The sound of the Joker's footsteps echo in Jason's ears as they make their way towards the room's iron door. The door creaks open and then slams shut, plunging the room into merciful silence.

The fire in Jason's cheek does not lessen as the minutes pass. Pain continues to spike in his body, and Jason cannot help the tears that leak from his eyes. They streak down his grimy cheeks and fall onto the concrete, forgotten.

"Bruceâ€"|" "

His hope that Bruce would rescue him had died months ago. He knows that Batman isn't coming, that he no longer cares about Jason â€" if he had ever cared. Jason has been replaced â€" as the Joker seems so keen on repeatedly reminding him â€" and he can now see how little he had meant to the man he had once dared to think of as a father.

And yet, in the rare moments when he is completely alone, Jason can't help when sometimes Bruce's name slips past his swollen and cracked lips. He feels like a child when he says it, and every time anger shoots up in him that he has resorted to calling out for the one who abandoned him. Yet still his broken voice speaks the name.

Jason does not try to move. He learned long ago that there is no way out of this room, and at this point he doesn't care to try and escape. Where would he go? Who would he go to? He has nothing waiting for him beyond this hell, so why leave? Besides, he's sure he would pass out from the pain before even managing to sit up.

Distant screams sound from outside the room. Not an uncommon sound, as Joker has had other "guests" in this abandoned Arkham wing before. None of them have stayed as long as Jason though. But these screams â€" they sound different. Moreâ€"panicked than pain-filled.

"Stop! Please! I don't know where the Joker is! He â€" he didn't say where he was going!"

"We â€" we were told to stay here! That's all!"

"Please! _Don't!_"

Jason's ears perk up in interest. He's certain those are Joker's goons shouting. He's become familiar with the voices of the ones who've managed to stay around longer than a couple of weeks. Which is rare, as Joker gets tired of using the same henchmen, and sometimes needs more than just Jason's torture to sate his easily brought on boredom. But Jason has never heard Joker's men sound like that before. In fact, that's the kind of panic that Jason associated with the criminals he and Batman would take down togetherâ€|

The door to the room slams open. Jason's eyes blearily lift, expecting to see an enraged guard standing there to give him a beating simply because the guard needs to vent some anger. When his eyesight focuses, Jason's heartbeat speeds up in disbelief.

It can't be. It must be another hallucination. Or a dream. A bitter, mocking dream.

The vision of Batman stares down at Jason, completely still. It takes a hesitant step forward, and then rushes to Jason's sides, kneeling beside the broken boy.

"Jasonâ€|" the hallucination whispers. Now Jason is certain that this is a dream, because the Batman he knew would never speak with such emotion. The Batman he knew wouldn't allow his voice to break on a simple name, and wouldn't allow his hands to shake as they reached towards Jason.

"Noâ€|pleaseâ€|" Jason whispers. He can't take another vision of Batman. Whether this Batman ends up beating him like he had in dreams before, or he carries Jason away to false safetyâ€|Jason can't handle it anymore. "Pleaseâ€|go 'wayâ€|"

"Jason, oh godâ€|_Jason_," the hallucination says. Batman takes a shuddering breath. "Jason, it's me. It's Bruce."

"N-noâ€|" mutters Jason. "Not realâ€|you're notâ€|"

"It's _me_, Jason," Batman insists. "I swear to you, I _am_ real. I'm _here_, Jason. I'm here to take you home."

"Noâ€|" Jason sobs. Tears spill from his eyes. It's too much. He'd rather face another wrathful Batman in this nightmare than a kind, loving one. It's been so long since anyone had shown him affection that he has no idea what to do with it.

The hallucination grasps Jason's hand and presses it to its cheek. Jason feels warm flesh, sweat, and the leather of the familiar black cowl. He feels Batman's breath on his palm. Then the hallucination pulls back its mask, and there is the worn face of Bruce Wayne.

Jason had never seen Bruce's face in his dreams before. It had always been Batman. And he'd never seen Batman crying in his dreams. But Bruce is weeping now, and Jason can't help but sob along with him.

"I'm real, Jason," whispers Bruce.

"Bruceâ€¦" Jason chokes out. "Bruceâ€¦"

Bruce pulls Jason into his arms, halfway lifting Jason off of the blood-smeared floor. Jason cries out from the pain that radiates throughout his body, making Bruce flinch, but Jason does not resist. He lets himself sink into Bruce's arms as he sobs softly, too weak to do anything else.

"Shhâ€¦it's alright, Jason," Bruce says, stroking his son's blood-soaked hair. "It's alright."

"I'mâ€¦I'm so sorry. I-I didn't mean, Iâ€¦please, Bruce. It's all myâ€¦I-I'm sorryâ€¦" Jason rambles, the words almost undiscernible through his sobbing. "Pleaseâ€¦don't leave m-me. I don't wantâ€¦"

"I'm never leaving you again, Jason," Bruce says, the words fervent in their honesty. "I promise. We're going right now."

Bruce pulls the cowl down over his face again and then slips his arms beneath Jason's back and knees. He stands, cradling Jason against his chest. Jason tries to hold back his cries of pain, but the agony is so overwhelming that he can't help the strained hiss that escapes his lips.

"We'll be home soon, Jason," Batman says. "Just hang on."

Lightheaded, Jason can't even find the strength to nod. As Batman walks out of the room the edges of Jason's vision begin to dim. He's incredibly dizzy now, and the pain is doing no favors in his attempts to focus. He barely registers that all of Joker's guards are lying sprawled out across the floor and against the walls. Batman must have done a thorough job, since they continue on without interruption.

Then Jason feels them ascending. The movements are too smooth to feel like he's being carried up a staircase, and Jason wonders if maybe he _had_ _dreamed_ up Bruce after all, only for his mentorâ€¦his _father_ to carry him to heaven. Would he go to heaven? Would he be allowed in? The thought of anything else is too much for Jason to bear. Then he decides that the real hell can't be any worse than what he's endured for the past nine months. Stillâ€¦he desperately hopes that he will be granted mercy.

He hears the sound of a plane â€" a small jet, perhaps? It's engine roars through the sky above them, and Jason feels the rush of cool air on his ruined skin. How odd, that heaven would have jets in it. Don't the angels have wings? He's sure that they do. But nothing quite makes sense to him anymore.

"Alfred, we're on our way."

Alfred? Is he dead too? A selfish part of Jason hopes he is. Then he'd have _someone_ to keep him company, since he doubts Batman will bother staying by his side for much longer.

Before his thoughts can drift anymore, the darkness finally takes him

and there is only silence.

2. Chapter 2

****It's rare that I update this quickly, so don't get too used to this haha. But I had kinda written chapters 1 and 2 together, so I was able to finish up chapter 2 just now. ****

****Also, about everyone's ages. In my story, Dick is 20, Jason is 17 (16 when captured by the Joker), and Tim is 15. A bit different from the game, but I think these ages fit with this story better.****

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"Three broken ribs, five broken fingers, a fractured hip, a poorly healed right ankle and left wrist that I had to re-break and set properly, a severe concussion, several lacerations, severe bruising, a minor infection in a gash on the right thigh, a slight fever, and a deep burn on the left cheek."

With each line Dr. Leslie Thompkins reads off the list of injuries, Bruce feels his heart sink lower and lower. This is all his fault, what had happened to Jason. To his son. He had abandoned Jason, had given up on him. And now look what had happened; his boy's body has been shattered. At the mention of the barbaric J that now mars Jason's cheek Bruce feels fresh rage rise up in him. His fist tightens and he fights to control his fury, knowing that nothing he does out of anger will help his son right now.

Dr. Leslie sighs as she finishes the list. "And these are only the fresh wounds. There are multiple injuries he has had for much longer that have healed mostly on their own. Injuries from weeks, months ago. Fortunately, except for the ankle and wrist, they had healed fairly well during hisâ€¦imprisonment. I'm supposing Joker knew what to do to keep him just enough alive." Dr. Leslie sets down the list and rubs a hand across her forehead. "Bruce, I'm not going to put this lightly â€" he's in bad shape. It's a miracle he had lasted so long."

"Will heâ€¦" Bruce's mouth is dry and he has to swallow before continuing. "Will he make it?"

Her mouth set in a thin line, Dr. Leslie glances at Jason.

"Truthfully, I wasn't sure when you first brought him in. But now that I've treated his injuries and have been monitoring him for a few hours nowâ€¦I'm fairly certain he will."

Bruce hastily wipes a hand across his eyes. He does not reply, as he does not trust his voice at the moment.

Dr. Leslie shakes her head and takes off her glasses, wiping them with a handkerchief she pulls from her scrubs' pocket. "Bruce, it will take time, but Jason will recover from his physical injuries. Psychologically thoughâ€¦he's going to need a lot of help. More than

just you alone can give him."

Bruce nods, not taking his eyes away from the pale, heavily bandaged face of his son.

Glancing at Jason, Dr. Leslie begins to gather up her belongings. "I'll be back on Friday to check on him. He should wake in a few hours. Follow the instructions I left, and don't let him leave this bed."

Bruce doesn't say anything. Dr. Leslie walks over to him and places a gentle hand on his shoulder; Bruce lifts his eyes to her, but cannot find anything to say. Giving him a pat, Dr. Leslie nods and then leaves the room.

It's quiet, save for the rhythmic beeping of the machines hooked up to Jason. Telling Bruce that Jason's heart is beating. That it's steady, and it will grow stronger. But even that thought cannot drive away the horrible guilt within his chest.

"Jason," Bruce whispers. "I should haveâ€|all these monthsâ€|" He presses a hand over his eyes and takes a deep breath.

"Bruce?"

Bruce spins around in his chair; he had been so consumed in his thoughts that he hadn't even heard the door to Jason's room open again. Dick stands in the doorway, one hand still gripping the door handle. But Dick isn't even looking at Bruce â€" his gaze is focused solely on Jason.

"Godâ€|" Dick breathes. He takes a few hesitant steps into the room, glancing at Bruce for permission. Bruce says nothing, so Dick walks over to Jason's bedside, stopping just short of his fingers brushing against Jason's bandaged hand lying on the sheets. "I came as soon as Alfred calledâ€|" Dick mutters, his words lost as his eyes travel over the entirety of Jason's body, taking in the swelling, the bandages, the bruising. He swallows hard. "Bruceâ€|heâ€|_how?"_

How what? Bruce wonders. How did he find Jason? How was Jason still alive after all he had gone through? How could he have left Jason to such a fate for so many months, and not have found him? _How _was a very good question indeed.

He cannot think of a good enough answer, so he doesn't acknowledge the question. "Leslie says he'll make a full recovery. It'll take time butâ€|"

"A physical recovery, you mean," says Dick. He runs a hand through his hair, his breath rushing out of him. "Shit, Bruce. What are we gonna..howâ€|" Dick makes a frustrated gesture with his hands; it's not often he has trouble finding words. "_Tim_", he finally says. "How do we explain that to him?"

"Tim knows about Jason. He knows what happened," Bruce says.

Dick shakes his head. "No, how do we explain Tim to _Jason_. How do we explain another Robin to him?"

Bruce feels a tightening in his chest. "_We _won't be explaining anything to him," says Bruce. "That is something for me to tell him."

"And you really think Jason will take that news okay?" Dick asks. "Headstrong, brash, always needing to prove himself Jason? He always had treated the role of Robin as some sort of competition. As though he had to be a better version of me. It was some sort of self-worth kind of thing, I think. But now, with Tim here I don't think he's going to take that very well."

"We don't even know what state of mind Jason is in," Bruce says, his voice hard and suddenly void of emotion.

"What does that mean?" Dick snaps.

Bruce gives Dick a stern look. "Jason needs to focus on recovering; he doesn't need to be thinking about anything else."

"So what, are you just not going to tell him about Tim?" Dick asks sarcastically. A moment of silence follows, and Dick's eyes widen. "Bruce, no. You can't keep Tim from him. Tim lives here; how are you going to explain a new kid waltzing around the manor?"

"Tim's room is on a different floor from this one. And Jason cannot leave this bed," Bruce says. Dick's expression only grows in disbelief, and Bruce frowns at him. "I do not intend on keeping him from Jason for long. Just until we know the psychological state Jason is in."

"You mean you want to know how much Joker managed to break Jason mentally," Dick accuses viciously. "You know, Bruce, maybe instead of keeping secrets from Jason, you should try giving him the benefit of the doubt. Jason's a strong kid. He can pull through this. But he needs to know that he can trust us."

"He can trust me," Bruce snaps.

"Then prove it," Dick counters. Bruce's jaw tightens and the two men glare at each other, tension rising as they wait for the other to speak. Finally, Dick shakes his head. "I'll be downstairs." Bruce does not say anything, so Dick leaves without a word.

Pulling his chair closer to Jason's bedside, Bruce leans forward. He rests his elbows on his knees and clasps his hands together, pressing them against his mouth. He sits there, unmoving, simply watching Jason's chest rise and fall weakly. Alfred and Dr. Leslie had tried to clean Jason as best they could while they worked on him, but there was so much damage done to the boy's body that it had been more important to treat his wounds first. After Jason had been given proper antibiotics and thoroughly wrapped in casts and bandages, Dr. Leslie allowed Bruce and Alfred to wash Jason's face and hair.

It had been slow work. Not because it needed to be, but because Bruce and Alfred couldn't bring themselves to work any faster. Being the stronger of the two, Bruce had held Jason's head over a bowl as Alfred washed the grim, grease, and blood from the boy's hair. The water in the bowl had quickly turned a revolting grayish brown, but neither Alfred nor Bruce seemed to notice it.

It was when they were washing Jason's face that Alfred's stance had broken. Dr. Leslie had put a temporary bandage over the burn on Jason's cheek, allowing Bruce and Alfred to tend to the wound themselves. When Bruce had first peeled away the bandage, both him and Alfred did not comment or show any emotion at the sight of the crude _J _seared into Jason's skin. No one else would have noticed it, but the small hitch in Bruce's breathing was not missed by Alfred.

Bruce gently wiped Jason's skin clean as Alfred prepared the burn ointment. But the moment Alfred's fingers brushed against the _J_, Alfred's hand began to shake. Sucking in his breath, Alfred had turned away from Bruce and Jason, his shoulders shuddering as he gripped the medical supply table.

Bruce had to finish tending to Jason's burn by himself.

Sitting beside Jason's bed now, Bruce wonders what this will mean for everyone. The return of a lost Robin, to a home where a new one had already come to take his place.

Tim did not take Jason's place, Bruce thinks savagely.

Then what is Tim doing here? What is he doing wearing that condemning _R _on his chest? Bruce sighs heavily and runs his hands through his hair.

There would be a lot of explaining to do once Jason woke up.

3. Chapter 3

When Jason first wakes up, he moans about clowns and crowbars and men dressed like bats. His eyes don't focus, and he doesn't recognize Bruce's face as it hovers directly in his line of sight. He only manages to stay conscious for ninety seconds before he passes out.

The second time Jason wakes up screaming. Bruce, who has just returned from patrol and all but collapses in the chair beside Jason's bed, is startled from his drowsy state by the terrified cries. He hurriedly leans over Jason, who is struggling violently against the bedsheets covering him. Bruce's attempts to calm Jason are futile, and it's only after Jason begins to tear his stitches in his thigh that Bruce is forced to inject Jason with a sedative. Bruce calls Dr. Leslie, who comes over despite the fact that it's five in the morning. She then sets up a schedule for Bruce and Alfred to follow with new drugs that will "ease" Jason's healing process.

Jason sleeps through the next three days.

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It's dark.

It's also warm. An odd sensation for Jason; he's become accustomed to the feeling of Arkham's icy chill settling deep into his bones.

His wrists ache. Well technically, everything aches. But for some

reason his mind focuses on his wrists, particularly his left one. He tries to move it but it's stuck in something.

What do we have here then?

The sound of the familiar voice sends Jason's heart plummeting down into his stomach. _No. Not again._ He strains to push through this strange mugginess he's in. Is he inside a water tank of some kind? He doesn't feel wet, but he can only describe the sensation his body is experiencing as similar to the one a person feels when trying to swim through water.

Do you think I'm going to hurt you?

His breath quickens as panic rises. Where is he? Where is the Joker? He needs to see. He needs to know where the Joker is.

Is he blind? Has the Joker blinded him?

Can I have him, daddy?

He can't breathe. He's gasping for air, but he can't draw breath.

Anything to make you happy, princess.

He is suffocating in his panic. _No, no, no. Not again. Please no._ He's choking, pushing through the murky blackness.

Just make sure people know he's yours.

He hears the sound of flesh sizzling â€" smells the burning skin. Then comes a scream. And laughter.

With a gasp, Jason's eyes fly open and his body jerks forward as he is jolted back to consciousness. He struggles to draw in ragged, panicked breaths as his eyes dart around, searching for where the Joker might be standing. But once the shock of the nightmare passes Jason blinks in confusion and examines his surroundings with a bewildered gaze.

He's in a room. Not _the _room where he'd been confined for the majority of his imprisonment, but a new one. A bedroom. It has a nightstand, a fully stocked bookshelf, even a window. The curtains are closed over it right now, but even so the sight of it brings a lump to Jason's throat. He doesn't remember the last time he had seen a window, much less anything from outside. He's suddenly struck with the desire to pull back the window's curtains, but when he tries to move he realizes that he's heavily wrapped in bandages.

What theâ€¦?

Who had bothered to bandage him? And where _is _he? The place seems oddly familiar, butâ€¦

Jason's breath stops. His eyes grow wide and he stares for a long while, trying to process the impossibility of what he is seeing.

Bruce Wayne's slumped form is in a chair on the opposite side of the

room from the window. His head has fallen against his chest, which rises and falls softly in the man's sleep.

The first emotion that spikes in Jason is that of intense relief. _It happened. It wasn't a dream. Batman _Bruce_ rescued me. I'm not in Arkham anymore._ Those thoughts alone make it hard to breathe, as he's so overwhelmed with emotion by this realization. When he's finally able to fully process that he is indeed lying in one of the guest rooms at Wayne Manor, a new feeling swells within him. Rage.

"Jason?"

Jason looks back over to Bruce; he had no longer been paying attention to the man and hadn't realized he had woken. Bruce sits up in his chair, grimacing as he stretches his back. He locks eyes with Jason, but neither of them smile at each other. Jason simply stares, his gaze hardening; Bruce studies Jason's face, and though he tries to give something akin to a smile it doesn't manage to come across as one.

"How are you feeling?"

Jason's lips press together as an awkward pause fills the air. "Fine," he finally mutters.

Bruce nods, rubbing the back of his neck. "That's good. Dr. Leslie, she uh, says you'll make a full recovery. It'll take time butâ€|"

"It's June, right?"

Bruce is slightly thrown off by the sudden question. "What? Oh. Yes, it is."

Jason's right hand _the one with less broken fingers_ twitches and clutches the bedsheet beneath it tightly. "Thought so." He swallows thickly. "I tried to keep track, butâ€|after a whileâ€|" His eyes take on a distant look as his words trail off. He blinks and refocuses his eyes on Bruce. "So nine months then."

"Yes," Bruce says. His voice is grim, though he tries to keep his tone gentle.

Jason takes a deep breath, glancing up at the ceiling before returning his gaze to Bruce. Tears are shining in Jason's eyes, but his jaw is tight and Bruce can see that he is straining to keep his composure. "Where were you?" he whispers.

Bruce stiffens as the accusing question is asked of him. He grits his teeth, trying to think of the best way to answer. Where _had_ he been? What had he been doing while the Joker tortured his son? What is his excuse?

"Jason, we tried to find you. We searched everywh _"

"Oh you _tried?" _Jason seethes. "Exactly how _hard _did you try? Because I thought you had the reputation of being the 'World's Greatest Detective.' Isn't that what all your disgusting fans out there in Gotham call you? Isn't that why Commissioner Gordon holds

you in such high regard?" He leans forward, pressing his hands into the mattress to steady himself. Sweat is forming on Jason's brow, and Bruce can see that his body is starting to tremble from the effort of holding himself up.

"Jason â€"

"_Nine months_, Bruce. Nine months with the Joker â€" that's what you had condemned me to. You should have been able to find me _long _before now. I mean, did you even _want _to find me?" The strain on Jason's face is visibly evident now, his lips pulled back in a grimace of fury and pain.

"Jason, you need to â€"

"You didn't evenâ€|you justâ€|" Jason's eyesight shifts out of focus and his hands grip the sheets tightly as his breath quickens.

"Jason!" Bruce lunges forward, catching Jason as he begins to fall forward. Gently, he lays Jason against the pillows propped up behind him. "Jason?"

Jason's eyelids flutter and he gives his head a small shake, taking in gulps of air. "Justâ€|" He swats at Bruce's hands weakly, struggling to get away from the man's touch. "Don'tâ€|uch meâ€|" He shudders and avoids eye contact with Bruce, who remains hovering over Jason despite having pulled his hands away. "M' fine," Jason mumbles, turning away from Bruce and wincing at the pain his movements cause.

Bruce is still, watching Jason. But Jason's back is to him now, and Bruce knows that he won't get anywhere else with him at the moment. He hesitates, but finally shakes his head and leaves the room, shutting the door behind him.

Tears begin to drip down Jason's cheeks and he wipes at them angrily, growling at the pain shooting through his fingers. Even now, away from that damned room at Arkham, his body continues to be in agony. Jason's eyes focus on the window curtains once again.

He wants to see the sky. He hasn't had that luxury in nine months and God help him if he'll let a few damn curtains stop him from seeing it now.

Groaning at his body's protests, Jason carefully pushes himself up so that he's sitting at the edge of the bed. By the time he manages to drag his legs over the edge of the mattress he's so dizzy that he has to blink heavily for a good ten seconds before being able to focus again. Looking down at his legs Jason sees that his right one is wrapped in a cast from the knee down. The other one may be able to hold him â€" if he can find something to use as a crutch.

Looking around wildly, frustration builds in Jason as he fails to find anything that might be able to help him walk. The chair Bruce had been sitting is in on the other side of the bed, and there's no way Jason has the strength to make it over there and back with it. The room is annoyingly lacking of any other useful pieces of furniture.

Fine. I'll walk on my own.

Gritting his teeth, Jason tenderly places his left foot onto the floor. He begins to put his weight on it as he pulls himself into a standing position, leaning heavily on the edge of the bed for support. It doesn't feel terrible to stand on his left foot and a spark of confidence lights up in Jason.

Okay, carefully nowâ€|

His muscles tense, he gingerly brings his right leg forward and places it in front of him. Then he tries to put weight on it.

Pain immediately explodes from his ankle and â€" to his surprise â€" his hip. A cry of pain is ripped from him as he crashes to the floor, too weak to hold himself up in the wake of the fire blazing through his body.

The door to his room slams open and someone is shouting something, but Jason can't understand it. All he sees and hears is red.

"Master Jason!"

The familiarity of the voice is what catches Jason's attention. His head snaps up to see Alfred leaning over him, looking absolutely frantic.

"Al-Alfred?" Jason wheezes. He hasn't seen Alfred in nine months, but from what Jason can tell in his haze of pain the butler looks exactly the same as he had before. Which would have been comforting, if Jason wasn't lying on the floor in a groaning heap at the moment.

"What's going on?!"

And any sense of comfort Alfred's presence might have brought Jason is suddenly wiped away by Bruce's voice. Jason struggles to pull himself upright, but he just can't. Now there are two men hovering over him, and the pain radiating throughout Jason's body is making everything fuzzy and confusing and suddenly Jason is having a hard time remembering exactly _who _is looming above him.

Then a firm hand clamps down on Jason's forearm and Jason instantly goes into a frenzy, flailing wildly in an attempt to wrench himself free.

"Damnit Jason, _stop! _You're going to hurt yourself even more!"

But Bruce's shouts don't register in Jason's mind. All he knows is that he's in a room without any visible windows, two unidentifiable men are holding him down, and all his body can feel is _pain_.

"Don't touch me!" Jason screams. "Don't! Stop â€" _please!"_

"_Jason!"_

"Master Jason!"

Jason feels a prick in his arm and he immediately jerks away from the

contact. "_No!" _But it's too late; the drugs are taking effect and Jason can already feel his movements slowing.

"No, no, noâ€|noâ€|" he whimpers. Who knows what Harley had used this time? Another hallucinogenic drug? Or maybe a paralytic one? The sickening feeling of helplessness has already crept up on Jason, and he knows he can't do a fucking thing about it.

All he can hear is demented, sadistic laughter.

4. Chapter 4

****This chapter is a bit longer than the others; I just couldn't find a good cut-off point, so here ya go. Enjoy all the angst!****

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"You did some pretty good damage to your ankle, Jason. I've done what I can, and though it'll take a bit longer than your other bones to heal, you'll still be able to walk on it â€" eventually. Though I doubt you'll ever be able to do so with as much ease as you had nine months ago."

Dr. Leslie glances over the top of her glasses at Jason, who is watching her with a sullen expression. Alfred and Bruce stand on either side of Dr. Leslie, with Alfred's eyes holding much more blatant sympathy in them than Bruce's.

Dr. Leslie pushes her glasses back further up her nose as she continues to read from the clipboard she's holding. "Your fractured hip also took some further damage from your fall. I've treated that as well, but â€" as I said â€" it may never fully heal back to its original strength." Dr. Leslie's eyes lock onto Jason's, whose gaze wavers for a moment before holding steady against the doctor's. When she speaks next, her voice is firm. "You are not to leave this bed for at least a full week. If after the first week of bedrest passes and Bruce allows it, you may use a motorized wheelchair to move around the Manor; a regular wheelchair would be too strenuous for your hands to maneuver. Due to your broken wrist and fingers you are not to use crutches for at least five weeks. Do not disobey these rules, or you _will _cause permanent damage to your body."

As Dr. Leslie speaks, Jason seems to shrink in on himself a little. It's barely noticeable, but Bruce can hardly believe his eyes. The Jason Todd he knew before would never allow a simple verbal lecture to beat him down. He would've fought back in some way, either with his own sharp retorts or at least a harsh glare. But as Dr. Leslie lays down the rules for Jason's recovery, Jason's shadow of defiance he had been holding onto earlier seems to seep out of him, and he seemsâ€|smaller. This subtle change from the Jason Bruce had known nine months ago unnerves him a bit.

"Do you understand me, Jason?" Dr. Leslie asks.

Jason bites his lip. "Yes," he mutters.

"Good." Dr. Leslie circles something on the documents clinging to the clipboard before hanging them from a hook on the wall. She picks up her bag and slings it over her shoulder. "Call me if you need anything," she says, addressing Bruce and Alfred. Alfred nods in response, and Dr. Leslie excuses herself from the room.

Bruce turns back to Jason, frowning slightly. "Jason, what you did was incredibly dangerous. You could have done some severe damage to yourself. You risked permanently laming yourself â€" and you know all of this. This information should not come as a shock to you." Jason shoots Bruce a glare, which only makes Bruce's frown deepen. "If you try to leave this bed again, I will be forced to have someone watch you around the clock. Be it myself, Alfred, Dick â€"

"Dick's here?" The question holds both surprise and disgust in its tone.

Bruce's lips press together. "Yes. He's been here all week â€" ever since I brought you back. And he has no problem watching you if I ask him to."

"Of course he doesn't. As long as the order comes from you, he'll do anything." Jason makes a disgusted noise. "Why don't you just strap me down to the damn bed and be done with it? I've become pretty used to being tied down and forcefully injected with drugs over the past nine months."

Alfred shifts uncomfortably at that. Bruce stiffens, his fists clenching.

"We only want what's best for you," says Bruce. He gives a small sigh. "Jason, what were you doing? What could possibly have made you try to leave your bed?"

Jason tightens his jaw, scowling at he avoids eye contact with Bruce. Neither Bruce nor Alfred speak, allowing the silence to continue as Jason debates whether or not to answer.

"It's stupidâ€|" Jason finally mumbles. "Doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters, Master Jason," says Alfred, his tone noticeably more soothing than Bruce's.

Jason gives his head a small, frustrated shake. He glances over at the window â€" where the curtains are still drawn. Alfred and Bruce follow his gaze, and understanding seems to spark in both their eyes at the same moment.

"Why don't we let in some light?" Alfred suggests, keeping his voice bright and pretending as though the idea is unrelated to the matters being discussed. Not waiting for an answer, he swiftly walks over to the window and pulls back the curtains.

The whipping of fabric rustles through the tension strung between the three of them as the curtains are tugged to either side of the window. It's mid-afternoon, and sunlight streams through the glass panes, casting a warm glow across the floor and onto the edge of Jason's bed. The branches of a large tree dip down into the top right

corner of the window, their bright green leaves standing out against the pale blue sky.

Jason flinches at the initial brightness of the sunlight, but he quickly recovers and finds that all he can do is stare. It's as though he has forgotten how to speak or move; he doesn't do anything except silently take in the sight of the sky and sun. His eyes are shining with unshed tears and he swallows hard, trying to rid himself of the lump in his throat.

Alfred places a gentle hand on Bruce's shoulder. Bruce, who had been watching Jason, reluctantly turns to look at Alfred. An understanding is shared between them and they quietly leave the room, shutting the door behind them.

Completely unaware that he's been left alone, Jason continues to gaze out the window. He leans back against the pillows propping him up and doesn't move until much later, when he finally falls asleep.

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The next morning Alfred leaves a remote of sorts on Jason's nightstand for him to use. It has two buttons and a speaker on it. One is to call Alfred if Jason needs anything — similar to a walkie talkie. The other is an emergency button. Jason doesn't like the idea of calling Alfred with a remote — it makes him feel as though he's reducing Alfred to a servant. So he never uses it. Besides, what would he call him for? It's not like Alfred would forget to bring him his meals. Besides that, there isn't much else Jason needs to bother Alfred for. Or at least, that he wants to bother Alfred for.

Because in truth, he's incredibly lonely lying in the guest room for hours on end, day after day. There's a TV where he can watch anything he wants, but he grows tired of it quickly. He wants to ask Alfred to pull some books from the bookshelf for him, but even that's difficult for him to request. He hates that he needs help with the simplest tasks, so he doesn't ask.

Despite his insistence that he needs nothing, two days later Jason wakes to find a neatly arranged stack of books on his nightstand.

Yet not only is he restless, but — and he would never admit this — he desperately longs for frequent company. If he sits alone for too long his mind begins to wander. And where it wanders is never good. The chill of Arkham's damp air sinks back into his body, the sound of a crowbar scraping over concrete echoes in his head, and a too-wide grin flashes in front of his eyes.

When he talks to someone — preferably Alfred — he's distracted from all of that. Even a fight with Bruce would be better than being alone. But he rarely sees Bruce, as Bruce always seems busy with something, be it Wayne Enterprises or the Batman. Not that he minds of course; the less he sees of Bruce, the better.

Dick visits him on the second day after Dr. Leslie's visit. Jason is reading, sunlight streaming through the open window onto his book, when a tentative knock sounds at the door. Frowning slightly, Jason lowers a rather worn copy of Les Misérables, reluctantly turning

his attention to the door.

"Jason? You awake?"

Jason doesn't bother to hold back his groan. *_Fantastic; just who I want to see right now_*. Deciding not to respond, Jason lifts his book back up and continues reading.

Another knock.

"Jason? I know you're awake. Alfred just came down from bringing you the *_entire _batch* of chocolate pudding."

Jason smirks, glancing at the nightstand where a rather impressively-sized bowl of pudding sits.

"*â€*Jason?"

Emitting an irritated grunt, Jason slams the book shut. "Fine. Come in."

The door immediately opens, and Dick sticks his head in. He looks rather unsure of himself at first, but when he catches Jason's gaze a small smile spreads across his lips. "Hi."

Jason frowns, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Dick runs a hand through his hair awkwardly, glancing about the room. "Can I *â€*come in?"

"You've already bothered me, so you may as well."

Dick doesn't seem deterred by Jason's cold tone and comes in, leaving the door slightly ajar behind him. He takes the chair Bruce sometimes sits in, seemingly now at ease as he settles into the seat.

There's a moment of silence.

"I see you've got some light reading material," Dick jokes, nodding at the thick book lying on Jason's lap.

Jason shoves the book off of his legs and out of Dick's line of view. "Why are you here?" he asks, irritated.

Dick shifts in his seat, suddenly looking rather out of place. "I came to check on you. I wanted to see how you were doing."

Jason snorts. "Well thank you," he says sarcastically. "It's nice to know that in order to receive attention from you I only have be a guest of the Joker's for nine months to get it."

Dick winces at the sharp words. "Jason *â€*"

"Dick, you didn't give a shit about me when I was Robin," snaps Jason. "All I wanted to do was *_try _to* be as good as you had been, and you treated me like some inconvenient annoyance. And that was during the rare times you even had been around. So fuck you and your sudden, newfound concern you have for me."

Dick has the grace to look abashed, averting his eyes from Jason's as

he decides best how to respond. "Jason," he says. "I know that I wasn't a good brother â€"

"We're not brothers," Jason grinds out.

Dick clenches his fists, struggling to keep his tone level. "â€ before all ofâ€|this. I recognize that I should have been around more, I should have tried to connect with you more. But I didn't, and now I want to make up for that."

"How generous of you," mutters Jason.

Dick sighs. "Look, Jason, I just want you to know that I'm here for you. If you need someone to talk to or â€"

"_Right_. Like I'm going to talk to you about what happened to me."

Dick's eyes momentarily rest on the bandage covering Jason's left cheek. It last hardly longer than a second but Jason immediately turns away, his face taking on a subtle reddish shade. "Just go away," he says, his voice suddenly small and low.

Dick hesitates, clearly wanting to stay. But he decides better of it and stands, solemnly making his way over to the door.

"You know," he says, his hand resting on the doorframe. "That remote calls Alfred, but if you ever _do _want to talk, just tell Alfred to get me. I'll come whenever you need me to."

Jason doesn't respond. His hand curls around his book, ignoring the pain in his fingers as his grip tightens. He refuses to look in Dick's direction, and only moves again once he hears the reassuring click of the door shutting.

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The following morning there's another soft knock. Jason knows exactly who it is; only Dick knocks in such an annoyingly hesitant way.

"Jason? Look, all I'm doing is bringing you your breakfast. Alfred is busy stitching up a bad cut Bruce got on patrol." A pause. "Can I come in?"

"â€|yes."

The door opens and there's Dick holding a tray laden with oatmeal and a small bowl of plain apple sauce. Jason wants to groan at the sight; all he's had since he was brought back to Wayne Manor was various degrees of liquid food, since his stomach can't handle anything else at the moment.

Dick carries the tray to Jason's bedside and sets it on the nightstand. He looks like he wants to say something, but then he taps his hand against his thigh in frustration and shakes his head. "Okay, well, I guess I'll leave then." He turns to go.

"Hey, Dick?"

Dick spins around almost too fast. "Yes?" But he keeps his tone impassive, as though he really doesn't care to talk to Jason when it's so obvious to Jason that he does.

Jason waits a moment, wondering if this was the right time for it. But then he thinks, to hell with it. "I'm just wondering when you and Bruce were going to tell me about your new Robin."

If he wasn't so pissed, Jason would've laughed at Dick's face. His expression falls to one of disbelief and panic so fast that Jason is rather proud that he's able to get such a reaction from him.

"What?" Dick breathes.

"The new Robin," Jason repeats. He keeps his voice even, though there's an underlying layer of acidity that Dick easily picks up. "The one that's been running around with Bats for months now. The one that replaced me. Ring a bell? Or maybe you just ignore this one too."

Dick's muscles are tense and his jaw tight. He's nervous, and that fact makes a rather smug Jason feel much more in control of his own emotions.

"Jason, how did youâ€¦?"

"Oh, I've known about him for a long time," Jason says. "Joker would decorate the walls of my cell with pictures of him and Batman."

Dick's face pales slightly at that.

"Joker loves to belabor a point. And he just couldn't get enough of the fact that Batman replaced me so quickly after I had gone missing. He thought it was hilarious. I didn't agree with him."

Dick swallows slowly. "Jason, it's not as simple as I'm sure the Joker made it seemâ€¦"

"Really?" says Jason. "Because I'm not quite sure how else it can be explained."

"Look, Batman needs a Robin, and â€¦"

"And finding the current Robin would've been too much of a bother for him, right?" Jason says, his voice steadily rising in volume. "Bruce saw an opportunity and he took it. He finally got rid of this gutter rat screw-up, and decided to bring in someone better for the job."

"Jason, that's not â€¦"

"I hope Bruce trained him better than he did me, because if Joker lays his hands on him, he's all on his own to get out that fucking situation," Jason continues, his voice nearly reaching shouting level at this point. "Or maybe not. Bruce will probably come rushing in to rescue that piece of shit replacement, whereas he felt I needed a good nine months to rot before he decided to come save my sorry ass!"

"Jason â€" "

"_What's going on here?" _

Jason and Dick snap their heads towards the doorway, where Bruce is standing. He's wearing sweats and a plain undershirt, from which beneath a bandage wrapped around his shoulder is visible. Bruce looks between Dick and Jason, his gaze questioning. There doesn't seem to be any anger, more cautionary suspicion than anything else.

Dick is the first to speak. "Bruce, it's â€" well, Jason â€" "

"I know about your new Robin," spits Jason. If Bruce is surprised by this information, he doesn't show it. He glances over at Dick, who raises his hands in defense.

"I didn't â€" " Dick begins.

"_He _didn't tell me," Jason interrupts. "Joker did." He gives a bitter laugh. "He told me over and over and _over_ again. It was his favorite fucking thing to tell me."

Bruce stiffens the tiniest bit.

"So how long were you going to wait till you told me?" asks Jason. "Or were you just never going to tell me at all? Maybe you're just waiting for me to heal up so you can _finally_ _kick me out once and for all." He pauses, waiting for Bruce to speak. He doesn't. "Come on," Jason shouts. "_Say something!_"_

Bruce is completely still, his expression unreadable. Finally, after catching Dick's pleading look, he answers. "Jason," he says, carefully. "I was going to tell you when the time was right."

Jason scoffs. "What does â€" "

"_Let _me finish," Bruce says darkly. Jason's mouth shuts, but his expression only grows in fury. "I didn't want to burden you with unnecessary stresses while you were recovering. I thought it best to let you heal first, and then I would introduce you to Tim."

"Tim." Jason says the name with the manner one has after discovering a particular disgusting thing left rotting in a trash bin. "Well I hope he's all that you want in a Robin, Bruce. Seeing as you couldn't wait to replace me with him."

"It wasn't like that, Jason."

"No?" Jason laughs harshly. "What was it like then, Bruce? Come on, I'm _dying _to hear your excuse." He gestures down at his bandaged body. "I pretty much have."

Dick's hands tighten on the edge of the chair he's sitting in. Bruce merely glances at the rest of Jason's body before matching the furious boy's gaze again. "Jason, Tim did not replace you. He came to me because I needed the help. He's extremely gifted, and was a valuable asset in the search for you. He â€" "

"Obviously is a much better Robin than I could ever hope to be," Jason finishes. He sinks back against his pillows, his rage

dissipating with almost concerning suddenness. Now weariness is what clings to Jason's voice. "I get it. Just—" He looks away. "Just leave me alone."

"Jason —" Dick says weakly.

"Just _get out._"

Dick looks up at Bruce, whose face is now completely emotionless. Dick starts to open his mouth, but Bruce turns and leaves the room before he can get a word out. Casting a final glance back at Jason, Dick stands and quietly follows Bruce, shutting the door gently.

Once their footsteps fully fade, Jason punches one of his pillows with a grief-stricken cry of rage. Pain shoots through his hand but Jason ignores it, striking the pillow over and over again. Tears blur his vision and dry sobs rack his body but he does not —_cannot_— stop himself. Only when his hand finally refuses to work, due to the agonizing throbbing in it and the exhaustion pulling at him, does he finally stop.

He's abandoned you—|thrown you away like an unwanted puppy.

And Jason screams.

5. Chapter 5

It's 3:09 in the morning. The window to Jason's room is shut and locked — as it always is at night, per his request — but the curtains remain pulled back. Moonlight streams in, spilling onto the rumpled bedsheets covering Jason.

The door to his room softly creaks open. A large, shadowed figure steps into the room, taking careful steps towards the edge of Jason's bed. Standing over Jason, he looks down with a solemn air. He sighs, and then pulls back a black cowl that had been partially covering his face. The clasps holding his cowl and cape in place are undone, and the items are quietly tossed onto the floor beside the chair he pulls up to the bedside.

Bruce sits and leans forward, watching Jason's too-thin chest rise and fall. His eyes travel to Jason's hand draped over the sheets and grimly studies the swelling, the bandages, and the cast holding the wrist in place. Jason mumbles something indiscernible in his sleep and Bruce's attention is snapped back to his boy's face.

A low moan escapes Jason's lips. "No—|don't—|" his eyebrows draw together and his mouth dips into a small frown. "Not again—|plea—|se—" Jason shifts, drawing the bedsheets tighter over him. He flinches as he moves, and Bruce can't tell if it's from the pain of his healing body or if it's a reaction to whatever dream he's having.

Bruce's hands clench as he watches Jason, debating whether or not to wake him. Still deep in his sleep, a soft sob emanates from Jason. "Please—" The muscles in Bruce's body tenses, and he readies himself to shake Jason awake if need be. But then Jason lets out a shuddering breath and his body relaxes as he falls further into

unconsciousness.

Sighing in relief, Bruce eases back as Jason calms his movements. A long moment passes, and then Bruce reaches his hand out and tenderly lays it against the top of Jason's head. Jason twitches ever so slightly at the contact, but does not wake. Keeping his hand as still as possible, Bruce revels in this rare moment. Even now with his son back home he isn't allowed to touch him " Jason won't let him. He _hates _Bruce now, and Bruce desperately wishes he could somehow make Jason understand why he had done what he had done.

Bruce's fingers sink into Jason's thick hair " hair that is in much need of a trim. Dark strands fall across Jason's forehead, strongly contrasting with his pale face. And in the moonlight, with his face relaxed in sleep, Jason looks much younger; he actually looks his age. Months of pain, anger, and fear fall away from the boy's face, and Bruce can't help but think that seventeen is much too young for anyone to have to live through what Jason did.

"I'm so sorry, Jason," Bruce whispers. He pulls his hand away from Jason and presses it against his eyes as he hunches over, his shoulders shaking.

He stays by Jason's side until dawn.

6. Chapter 6

"If we don't tell Dr. Leslie there won't be a problem."

"Absolutely not, Master Jason."

"Come on, Alfred. Back me up on this."

"I am not in the nature of lying to good friends or risking putting _you _in further harm's way."

"Well when you put it _that _way it just sounds terrible."

"That's because it is."

Jason gives an exasperated sigh, dropping back against the pillows propped up behind him. "Alfred, we both know I don't need a motorized wheelchair. The joystick is ridiculous, especially when I can just push myself around with a _normal _wheelchair."

"_You_ are being ridiculous, Master Jason," Alfred responds with a huff. He raises the feather duster in his hand and begins swiping the dust off of the window curtains in Jason's room. "Master Bruce will be sure to get you the very best wheelchair model available. You should be looking forward to it; come tomorrow morning, you'll be able to move around the Manor freely."

It has been a week since Dr. Leslie's visit. Jason had done as told and had not left his bed for the entirety of it, though it had been quite a challenge for him to do so. So this morning Bruce had come by to tell Jason he would be able to use a wheelchair tomorrow. And though Jason had tried to give Bruce as cold a shoulder as possible, his relieved excitement at the news had been fairly noticeable. Then he remembered that he had to use a _motorized_ wheelchair and he

decided to "talk" to Alfred about it.

"What will be ridiculous is me needing to push a stupid lever to move forward ten feet, and whirring and buzzing as I do so. I'll feel like an old granny."

Alfred shakes his head and continues to dust, ignoring Jason.

Jason knows the excuses he's giving Alfred are half-hearted and pathetic. And really, they're not even legitimately why he's so against the whole thing; rather, it has more to do with the fact that he is still so fucking helpless. It's driving him crazy. Not only can he not walk on his own, but the things he can do with his hands are severely limited as well, due to his broken wrist and five broken fingers. He can't even push himself in a regular wheelchair. _That's_ what bothers him â€" the fact that he can do little to nothing because of the restrictions put on him by his injuries.

So he wants a non-motorized wheelchair. He wants to be able to do _something_ by himself, even if that something is as simple as pushing a wheelchair. Because then he'd feel less of a broken body and more like a person who is able to take charge of themselves. Even with the knowledge that it could damage his hands further, he can't help but feel this burning desire to want it anyway. It's the most frustrating thing.

"Master Jason, I will not partake in these ludicrous schemes of yours," Alfred says with an air of dignity. Jason tries to look mockingly offended, but Alfred doesn't seem to care. "You will have a perfectly decent wheelchair tomorrow, and I fully expect you to use it. I will not have you sulking in this room forever."

Jason sighs. "Fine. You win, Alfred."

Alfred lowers the feather duster, brushing off the front of his shirt. "Good. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to prepare lunch for you."

And so for the rest of the afternoon Jason tries, through a variety of activities, to quell the itching desire to leave the bed he's confined to for another day. He reads, watches TV, even makes a set of origami knives from a notepad he finds in the nightstand's top drawer (he tries impaling the paper knives into the ceiling above his bed but, unsurprisingly, it doesn't work). By the time it's dinner, Jason is about ready to try and crawl out of his bed again. Alfred, who senses Jason's restlessness, takes it upon himself to make two bowls of cream of broccoli soup so that he is able to join Jason for his meal. The two talk for well over an hour, and by the time Alfred takes the food trays out of the room, the now easily exhausted Jason is nearly asleep.

When Jason wakes up the next morning, he finds that the desire to leave his bed has not dissipated in the least, and is practically twitching by the time he hears a knock at the door.

"Come in!" he exclaims, expecting to see Alfred enter. When the door opens, Jason's good mood takes a complete nosedive.

"You sound cheerful," Dick says with a smile, leaning against the doorframe.

"What do you want?" demands Jason, annoyed that Dick had been witness to his rather embarrassing giddiness.

"Nothing. I just thought you'd like have something that came in special delivery from Wayne Industries this morning." Dick turns and reaches into the hallway, pulling a new motorized wheelchair into Jason's room. He pushes it over to Jason's bedside, who eyes it suspiciously.

Dick laughs. "It's not going to bite you, Jason."

Jason glares at Dick. "I thought Alfred was going to bring it up."

"My, aren't you picky?" Dick comments, crossing his arms over the back handles of the wheelchair and leaning forward in an irritatingly relaxed stance. "Alfred's busy. He does have an entire Manor to run. So I'm bringing it up instead."

"Lucky me," mutters Jason.

Dick rolls his eyes. "So, what do you think? Is it as lame as you probably were complaining it would be?"

"It's far too early in the morning for your shit, Dick," says Jason. He studies the wheelchair, eyeing every inch of it critically. It looks extremely similar to a regular one, the only major differences being slightly thicker wheels and the joystick on the end of the right armrest. It's completely black, except for the wheels, which are a dark gray. "It's fineâ€¦I guess," he finally huffs out.

A smirk plays across Dick's lips. He gestures to the wheels. "Tim thought that the wheels were too wide for you to easily get around the more narrow halls of the Manor, so he adjusted them and brought them in closer. He also made the motor quieter; now it's almost completely silent when the wheelchair moves. And â€" even though Bruce insisted it was fine â€" he thought that the arm rests were made from too hard material, so he replaced them."

Jason sits there, stunned. He doesn't even know this kid, yet this Tim-nobody did all that? Why? Why would he bother to do something for a person he must know resents and hates him? Jason frowns, not sure how to respond. "Well, I'm sure it would have been fine even without him messing with it," he finally grumbles.

Dick is careful to hide his smile. "You, uh, want to try it out?"

"I don't need your help, you know."

"Don't be stupid, Jason."

Jason shoots another piercing glare Dick's way, but Dick hardly seems concerned. "Come on," he gestures. "Give me your hand."

Frowning, Jason drags his legs over to the side of the bed. It takes some time though, and Jason's face takes on a slight flush of embarrassment by the time he situates himself on the edge of the mattress. Placing his left foot on the floor, Jason grips the bed and starts to push himself into a standing position. Dick is by his side

immediately, holding out his hand; Jason ignores him and keeps his eyes glued to the wheelchair's seat. Carefully, he starts to turn himself around so he can sit. But his grip on the edge of the bed is shaky at best, and when he accidentally puts some pressure on his right foot he recoils and loses his footing.

Dick lunges forward, catching Jason's arm and clumsily pulling him into the wheelchair's seat, causing Jason to crash into it hard enough that the wheelchair rolls backwards a few inches. Losing his own balance, Dick stumbles backwards into the nightstand, which he hurriedly clings to in order to keep himself from falling over.

"I told you to take my hand!" Dick exclaims irritably, straightening.

Breathless, Jason scowls up at him. "I had it under control."

Rubbing his hands over his face, Dick lets out a groan. "I swear, you and Bruce are the two most stubborn people I've ever met."

At the mention of Bruce, Jason's expression hardens. He looks away from Dick, focusing on examining the wheelchair's joystick instead.

His shoulders relaxing from their tense position, Dick gently sits on the edge of the bed and faces Jason. There's a beat of silence, with Dick debating how to proceed. He sighs. "Jason, about what had happened between you, Bruce, and me the other day â€"

"I don't want to hear it, Dick," Jason says tightly.

"Too bad, because you need to." Jason looks up at Dick, surprised by the sudden ferventness in Dick's voice. "Jason, I get why you're angry. You have every right to be upset. But I think you should hear why Bruce did what he did before you start World War III with him again."

Jason tightens his jaw, but doesn't say anything. Taking it as a sign to continue, Dick takes a deep breath and does so. "When you first went missing nine months ago, Bruce searched everywhere for you. But somehow, Joker had done a flawless job covering his tracks. When Joker took you, he didn't leave anything behind. Not one single clue. And that's what unnerved Bruce the most. As any of us who's gone up against the Joker knows, normally he likes to leave some kind of memento behind, to taunt Bruce I guess. But this time, he didn't. And though he'll never admit it, this terrified Bruce. He knew that by not leaving anything behind, Joker was not planning on letting Bruce find you for a long time, if at all.

"Weeks turned to months, and even with Barbara and I helping we couldn't find a damn thing." Dick grinds his teeth, his fists clenching. "I felt so useless. What kind of protector, what kind of brother, was I, when all I could do while you were stuck in hell was sit in the Batcave and try and fail to play detective like an idiot?"

Jason shifts, looking vaguely uncomfortable.

Dick gives a low sigh. "Bruce was so consumed with his search for you

that he was neglecting the rest of Gotham. Sure, he still went on patrol, but he had turned careless. He got hurt too easily, he missed obvious clues—he was letting down the city he had sworn to protect. He couldn't balance protecting Gotham and searching for you —" he needed help. I was away in Blüdhaven and couldn't give it. But then this kid Tim Drake showed up."

Jason stiffens at the name, defensive anger sparking into his eyes.

A short laugh escapes Dick. Not at Jason, but at a memory springing up in his mind. "This kid, Tim Drake, comes to Wayne Manor and confronts Bruce, claiming he knows that Bruce is Batman and that he knows that Jason Todd is Robin. He says that despite Bruce telling the press that Jason Todd is currently studying abroad in Europe, he knows that Robin was taken by the Joker." Dick shakes his head in amazement. "Jason, this kid is something else. He's a genius, and he's got quite the detective skills too."

Seeing Jason's bitter expression, Dick clears his throat. "Anyway. So Bruce had been found out by this fifteen-year-old kid, which I thought was rather amusing. Then Tim offers to help search for you. Bruce, of course, says absolutely not and turns Tim away. But Tim starts mailing things to Bruce. Anything that he might think may be of help in finding you. Some of the information started out being pretty good leads, but they'd always eventually turn out to be dead-ends.

"Bruce was exhausted from trying to keep up with both Gotham and his search for you. He ignored every warning Alfred, Barbara, and I would give him, refusing to slow down. Then one night he took on a drug gang that outnumbered him by far too many, barely managing to come out on top in the fight. And only hours later he decided to confront Killer Croc." Dick pauses, his face taking on a pained look. "He arrived at the Batcave unconscious in the Batmobile, having lost an extremely dangerous amount of blood. Obviously he survived, though that was the final straw for everyone. Barbara and I came over and together with Alfred we convinced Bruce that he needed help —" he couldn't do this all on his own.

"Bruce was adamant, as he had been from the day you were taken, that the only partner he would work with was you. He was not going to 'replace' you, as he himself had said. But he would've driven himself to the grave if he didn't have a partner. So Tim Drake was called to the Manor and, after extensive training, given the position of Robin." Dick looks directly into Jason's eyes as he speaks next. "Bruce made it one-hundred percent clear to Tim that this was a temporary deal, just until we could find you. And Tim was completely okay with that; he understood the importance of finding Robin and bringing him home. Tim gave it his all searching for you, Jason. He looked up to you. He still does."

Jason averts his gaze, finding it hard to match it with Dick's any longer. He swallows thickly, silent.

Dick leans back a bit, his expression grim. "Two months ago, Tim's father was killed while their home was robbed. Tim had been on patrol with Bruce and didn't find his father's body until morning. He didn't have anywhere else to go, so Bruce took him in." There's a pause. "Jason, even though Tim lives here now, he still has every intention

of giving you back your place as Robin when you're ready. He knows how important it is."

Jason studies Dick's face, as though searching for anything hinting of a lie. But Dick's face and words reek of sincerity, and Jason has no idea what to say in response to everything he's just been told.

"Why didn't Bruce just tell me all of this?" Jason finally asks.

A glimmer of sadness flashes across Dick's face. "He's a difficult person, Jason. You know that. He _wants_ you to know how much he cares for you, but he justâ€¦has trouble expressing it."

Jason snorts. "Some protector of Gotham. Can't even hold a decent conversation with a wheelchair-confined teenager."

Dick is quiet for a moment. "Jason, I don't want you to hold resentment against Bruce. He â€" we all â€" want you back on the team once you get better. You're family, Jason."

Jason lowers his gaze. He's silent for a long while. "Thanks for bringing me the wheelchair, Dick," he eventually mutters. "I'm kind of tired thoughâ€¦" It's a lie, but it's all he can think of at the moment to get rid of Dick.

Dick stands, knowing that he's been dismissed. "It's fine." He hesitates. "Will you come down for lunch, though?"

Jason just shrugs. Dick gives Jason a sympathetic look, but leaves the room in silence. Jason doesn't even bother to try and maneuver his wheelchair; he simply sits there, staring at his hands as he goes over everything Dick had told him. Only when Alfred comes later to change the bedsheets does Jason move, pretending as though he had been exploring the entire floor of the Manor all morning.

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Hm. Not a big fan of this chapter. Hopefully you guys don't hate it though. Also, I guess I'm kinda mixing the video game and comics now, hence why Tim's origin story is not his original one. Hopefully it still works though.

7. Chapter 7

Jason doesn't come down for lunch. He's not sure he can face Dick at the moment, and he especially doesn't want to risk running into this Tim Drake. After all, he knows nothing about himâ€¦except that apparently he's a genius, he lives at the Manor, and he's Robin now and Jason's not. Dick's words about Tim's position being only temporary rattle in Jason's head, but he doesn't quite believe them. He knows from personal experience that once you become Robin, there's no going back. It invigorates you, consumes you, molds you. It _is_ _you_. Robin is more than just a mask and a cape â€" it's a part of

whoever wears the costume. Jason knows that Tim won't ever be able to truly let that go, even if he is currently spouting all this righteous talk about wanting to give it back to Jason.

Jason grits his teeth; he doesn't want to think about Tim Drake anymore. Instead he focuses on the studying the portraits decorating the walls of the hallway he is currently going down. For the past hour now Jason has been exploring the familiar corridors and wings of the manor that he had once been so proud to live in. Everything looks the same for the most part, but as Jason takes the elevator down to the floor his old room had been on he can't ignore the sickening feeling forming in his gut.

I don't belong here. The thought burns in his mind as he makes his way out of the elevator. He never has. Not when Bruce first brought him here, a reckless, dirty, foul-mouthed kid plucked from the street for some reason Jason still doesn't understand. Not as the Robin who could never live up to Dick's potential and, apparently, Tim's as well. And definitely not now, a broken shell of the already mediocre person he had been before. Ruined in both body and spirit, he knows he has no place at Wayne Manor. This is a place for the strong, the righteous, and the do-gooders. He knows he is none of those.

Jason's hands tighten on the wheelchair's armrests as he nears the door to his old bedroom. He stops in front of the closed door, anxiety tightening his chest. _Don't bother_, a part of him says. But he knows he _has_ to see it. He wants to know what had become of the place where a long-dead robin had once lived.

He pushes the door wide open, edging inside, and his eyes widen in disbelief.

It's exactly the same. His bed is still neatly made, as he had always made sure it was, the yellow blanket and green pillows perfectly arranged. The same chandelier hangs above the bed, looking just as ridiculously over extravagant as it did to Jason when he was fifteen. Behind the bed is the full-wall bookshelf that Alfred had personally built for Jason from old barn wood he and Bruce had collected. It's still stocked with the hundreds of books Bruce had bought for him, not a single volume looking to be out of place.

Jason wheels over to the bookshelf, wondering. He reaches up tentatively, placing his fingers on the spine of Arthur Conan Doyle's _The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes_. He takes a deep breath. Then he tips the book backwards.

To his right, a section of the bookshelf moves forward and to the left, revealing the opening to an old-fashioned looking elevator. The elevator doors open and a small ceiling light inside of the elevator blinks on, waiting for Jason to enter it.

Tears well up in Jason's eyes as he thinks of how many times he had gone down that elevator, dressed in his Robin uniform and nearly bouncing in his excitement to go on patrol with Bruce. He had been such a child back then. So naïve and filled with ideas of being exactly the son and partner Bruce wanted him to be. Then he got himself captured and it all went to hell.

He isn't exactly sure he's not still there.

"Jason?"

Jason jumps at the sudden voice and snaps his head towards the door. _Damn. I never got spooked this easily before. _He scowls in embarrassment at how easily he was startled, trying to tell himself that his heart isn't racing as much as it is. Then he sees who is standing in the doorway and his frown only deepens.

Jason can't quite place the expression with which Bruce is watching him. Weariness? Sadness? Uncertainty? Whatever it is, it doesn't deter Bruce from stepping into the room. He stops a good distance from Jason though, as though sensing Jason's hostility.

"It's still the same," says Jason quietly.

"Of course it is."

"Why?"

Bruce's brow furrows. "It's your room, Jason. It always will be."

Jason glances about them. "I thought you had given it to Tim."

Bruce frowns. "Why would you think that?"

Jason shrugs. "I've been stuck in one of the upstairs guestrooms ever since I got back here. If my room was still _my _room, I would've thought you would've put me here." Jason pauses, thinking. "No. That's not it at all. Tim â€" his room is on this floor too, isn't it?"

Bruce doesn't respond, but that's good enough of an answer for Jason. "Of course," he says. "Wouldn't want both Robins on the same floor, right? In case we somehow stumble into each other while I'm recovering. That would've been awkward, wouldn't it?" There's a touch of humor in the question, but it's more of a sinister kind.

Bruce shifts. If Jason had to peg an emotion on him, it might've been something close to discomfort. "Jason," Bruce finally says. "I didn't want â€"

"Dick already did the defend-Bruce's-actions speech this morning," Jason interrupts. "I don't need to hear a watered down version from you." Jason reaches up, shoving _The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes_ back in its place. The elevator door shuts, followed by the bookshelf. "You know Bruce, even though I want to punch Dick in the face every time I lay eyes on him, I do get the sense that he's _trying_. He's fucking annoying and sometimes I suspect not as genuine as he wants everyone to think he is, but he's trying. Why can't you?" Jason gestures to the entirety of the room. "Not once during my time here, before and after what happened to me, have I ever felt as though you truly _cared _for me. Dick says that you searched far and wide for me when I was gone, but it's really hard to swallow that and not call bullshit."

"Did I not come for you?" Bruce asks. His tone throws Jason off; it's rather subdued, almost mournful. "Did I not pull you off of the floor stained with your blood, blood that is on my hands because I could not protect you?" Bruce clenches his hands. "I'm sorry that I could

not save you sooner, Jason. I'm sorry I wasn't by your side the day Joker took you. And I'm sorry that you were brought back to a home with a new Robin. You are right to be upset with me. But you are wrong to assume that I do not care for you."

Jason stares at Bruce, unable to find a response for that.

Bruce holds Jason's gaze, his eyes hiding an emotion Jason desperately wishes he could understand. "I'll have Alfred put fresh sheets on your bed in here. You're welcome to come back to this room, Jasonâ€¦if that's what you want." Then he's gone, leaving Jason to his thoughts.

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Jason hates this part of the day.

He flinches as Alfred peels back the bandage covering his left cheek, hissing slightly as cool air brushes against the seared skin. Alfred says nothing; he merely places a gentle hand on Jason's shoulder, silently reassuring him as he prepares the burn ointment Dr. Leslie had left.

Jason has not looked at his wound. He hasn't been able to, as it's constantly under a bandage. But even if he were able, he's not sure that he would be brave enough to do it. He has a good idea of what the burn looks like â€" Joker had waved the branding iron in front of his face clearly enough. But the thought of seeing the actual burn on his face, permanently marring his skinâ€¦he can't do it.

He won't let anyone else see it either. Alfred is the only person he'll allow to change the bandages on it; he's even wary of having Dr. Leslie look at it when she comes to check on him every once in a while. All he can feel when the bandage comes off is utter shame. It's a symbol of how he had failed. He had screwed up and paid for it dearly. And now the mark of his mistake is forever imprinted on him. The idea of having anyone else see it is horrifying.

Jason's grip on his wheelchair tightens as Alfred gently applies the burn ointment to his cheek. The wound stings, but Jason doesn't care about that. He just wants the damn thing covered back up as quickly as possible.

When Alfred finally finishes putting the new bandage in place, Jason cannot help the sigh of relief that escapes him. Alfred casts Jason a sympathetic look and gathers up the medical supplies without comment.

"I'll be back with supper momentarily, Master Jason," Alfred says as he heads towards the door. "Unless you'd like to join Master Bruce, Master Dick, and Master Tim downstairsâ€¦?"

"No, Alfred," Jason says quietly. "Here is fine."

Alfred sadly nods and leaves the room. Propping his elbows on his knees, Jason leans forward and presses his face into his upturned hands, reminding himself to breathe.

Inâ€¦outâ€¦inâ€¦outâ€¦.

We don't want him to end up back here, do we?

Inâ€|outâ€|inâ€|outâ€|

No we don't, daddy. I want to keep him forever!

Inâ€|outâ€|inâ€|outâ€|.

8. Chapter 8

The following day, Jason finally ventures down to the first floor of Wayne Manor. He doesn't stay long in the entrance hall â€" it's far too big for his comfort. He can't see every crevice of the room, can't tell what stands in every shadow cast by the pillars. It unnerves him, having such openness behind his back no matter which way he turns. Leaving quickly, he instead heads towards the kitchen, the rumbling in his stomach loudly agreeing with this decision.

He pushes open the swinging door to the kitchen, expecting it to be empty. It's early in the morning, and so Bruce and his perfect little Robin are probably still asleep. He's not sure where Dick is at the moment, but Jason hasn't seen a hint of him yet today, so he doesn't expect him to be lounging in the kitchen.

He's right â€" it's not Dick who's sitting at the table.

A dark head of hair lifts as Jason enters the room, revealing the face of a boy who looks to be no older than fifteen. Bright blue eyes widen as they catch sight of Jason, and the hand that had been holding a half-eaten ham and cheese sandwich lowers, setting the now-forgotten food back on its plate.

Jason freezes, staring. A myriad of emotions swells in him at the sight of the boy â€" embarrassment, rageâ€|a hint of curiosity. He snaps his mouth shut, not realizing it had drooped open slightly.

The boy blinks, as though coming out of a trance. He hurriedly stands, pushing back the chair he had been sitting in. He's not nearly as tall as Dick; Jason guesses that if he were standing, he would best the kid in height by at least four inches.

"Umâ€|hi," the boy says. He raises a hand in a weak wave. "I'm Ti
â€"

"I know who you are," says Jason.

"Oh." Tim glances about him awkwardly. "I, uhâ€|was just having some lunch. Well, it's really early for lunchâ€|I guess it's breakfast. Breakfast-lunch. Brunch." He runs a hand through his hair, his cheeks turning a slight red. "I canâ€|I can leave, if youâ€|"

Yes. Jason wants to shout at him. _Leave. Get out of my home. Don't ever touch that uniform again, give me back Bruce, and just _leave_. But he doesn't. Studying Tim nowâ€|it doesn't exactly make Jason hate him. There's no arrogance in the boy, none of the self-righteousness he was expecting, not even a hint of stupidity Jason had been hoping

for. He seems like a genuinely decent kid. That irritates Jason "it'll make resenting him a lot harder.

"It's fine," Jason finally mutters. He wheels over to the kitchen counter where Tim had left everything he had used to make his sandwich. Grabbing two slices of bread, Jason takes a clean plate from the drying rack beside the sink and tosses them onto it. He adds ham and leaves it at that, since he's only begun to eat solid foods again and he's not sure how his stomach would handle cheese and mayonnaise. Jason cuts his sandwich in silence, pointedly ignoring Tim, who sits back down slowly.

Jason tosses the knife he had used into the sink and tries to pick up his plate with as much dignity as possible. Unfortunately, his movements are clumsier than he had been aiming for, due to the splints holding five of his fucking broken fingers in place. He grits his teeth and, balancing the plate on his knee, turns to leave the kitchen.

"Wait!" Tim exclaims. Tensing, Jason pauses. "You, uh, don't have to leave. I mean, you _can_ if you want. But I mean if you know."

"No." Jason faces Tim again. "No I don't know. But you know what I _do_ know?" he snaps. "I know that you're an idiot. You may be super-amazing smart, and brave, and whatever the hell else makes you such an amazing Robin, but you're still an idiot. Because you volunteered for this. You came into this knowing that the Joker had taken me and had been using me as his torture-toy for months. Are you really so ignorant as to assume that you may not come into that same fate? That one day, you may royally fuck up, and find yourself at the mercy of a sadistic psychopath without a glimmer of hope that your partner may come for you?" Jason's face turns into one of utter disgust. "Bruce thinks that it's okay to drag kids like us into his sick hero-game, but it's not." He turns back to the kitchen door. "Get out while you can."

"Jason!" Tim tries again, desperately. Jason ignores him, pushing the door open. "Being Robin it's yours to take when "

"Keep it," spits Jason. "I don't want it anymore." He leaves before Tim can get another word in.

His heart pounding wildly, Jason takes the elevator back up the floor his " and Tim's " room is on. As he nears his bedroom's door, he notices that it's cracked open slightly. Jason tenses, knowing he had shut it tight when he had left. Slowly he moves towards it, telling himself it must only be Alfred. Who else could it be right?

Pushing the door open, Jason's apprehension quickly turns to annoyance.

"Is the main elevator to the Batcave broken or something?" he says. "Because if you insist on using mine, I'm going back to the guest room."

Bruce turns to face Jason. Jason is surprised at what Bruce is holding; it's an old baseball, one that Jason instantly recognizes as his own.

"I had come up to see if you were awake," Bruce says. He rolls the baseball in his hands absentmindedly. "I wantedâ€¦I wanted to talk to you."

"About what?" asks Jason. "And where did you get that?"

Bruce glances down at the baseball. "It was hidden partway under your bed. I noticed it when I came in."

Jason purses his lips, eyeing the once treasured item. "What do you want?"

Bruce clears his throat. "I'm holding a charity ball here at Wayne Manor in two weeks." He pauses. "Dick and Tim are attending, andâ€¦well, I certainly understand if you don't want to come, but, if you are feeling up to itâ€¦I'd like you to."

Jason is silent. He watches as Bruce shifts the baseball between his hands, and Jason realizes he has never seen Bruce look soâ€¦awkward before. Tapping his fingers against the plate sitting on his lap, Jason sighs. "Iâ€¦I guess I can. But won't it be weird for me to be there with no explanation at all?"

Bruce shrugs. "We'll tell people it's also a homecoming celebration. I'm assuming Dick told you that you've been studying abroad in Europe for nine months?"

Jason rolls his eyes. "Yeah." He snorts. "Fine, whatever."

Jason can't believe his eyes. It's not as blinding as Dick's or as comforting as Alfred's, but it's a smile. And it brings a shadow of warmth to Bruce's face Jason hasn't seen since he's been brought back here.

"Good," says Bruce. He lifts the baseball slightly. "Maybe after you're all healed, we'll take another visit to Gotham High's baseball field." He sets the ball down on Jason's nightstand. "I have to go. I've got a meeting this morning that Lucius will kill me over if I miss." He walks towards the door, patting Jason's shoulder as he passes him. Jason doesn't recoil from the touch; to his surprise, he finds himself leaning into it. But it's gone as quickly as it came, and Bruce is heading out the door. "Try not to punch Dick in the face when he comes by later."

As Bruce leaves the room, a single word creeps up in Jason's mind: _stay_. But he doesn't say it. He can't. So he eats his sandwich in silence, wondering why on earth he had just agreed to Bruce's offer.

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"Jason? Jay, you in here?"

Jason looks up from _Les MisÃ©rables_ with a sigh. "Yesâ€¦" he groans.

The door to his room swings open and Dick's cheerful face pops in. "Someone's here to see you."

Suspicious curiosity perks up in Jason. "Who?"

Dick grins and opens the door wider. And in comes the most welcoming sight Jason has seen all week.

"Jason!" exclaims Barbara.

Then Jason's world stops. His mouth gapes open and horror spreads across his face as he stares at the wheelchair Barbara now uses to propel herself towards Jason.

"Barbara, youâ€¦whatâ€¦" he stammers.

Barbara pauses, and uncertainty flashes in her eyes. She glances down at her wheelchair. "Oh. Right. This happened after you wereâ€¦" She glances at Dick, whose face is even more apprehensive than hers. "Jason, I don't know ifâ€¦well, I don't think it's right to lie to you about it. Itâ€¦" she sighs, tensing for what she's about to say next. "It was the Joker."

Jason feels as though a heavy weight has slammed into his chest. He raises a hand; it hovers there for a moment before he agitatedly wipes it across his mouth. "_What?"_ he says.

Barbara grimaces. "I was shot. Not long after you wereâ€¦taken."

"Soâ€¦" Jason's voice trembles with disbelief. "You'reâ€¦"

"Paralyzed," Barbara finishes quietly. "Yes. Just from the waist down though."

"Oh, that's all?" Jason manages to get out. He's shaking. With horror, with rage. Wasn't he enough? Wasn't his torture enough to sate Joker's sick need for retribution against Batman? But Barbara too? Wonderful, smart, funny Barbara who â€" unlike Dick â€" had never held a grudge against him for becoming Robin? Who always had a supportive thing to say to him? He wants to vomit. Those precious days when Joker had left Jason alone in his misery, Jason had no idea what had been doing. Now that he knew they had involved maiming someone he had once looked up to like a sisterâ€¦

"Jason?" Barbara asks worriedly, noticing the color draining from his face. She wheels forward quickly, placing a hand over Jason's. "Hey, Jason. Look at me." Jason's eyes lift to hers and she smiles in reassurance. "It's alright. I'm okay. Joker didn't take me; after I was shot, I was brought to the hospital and taken very well care of. It's okay, alright?" She squeezes his hand. "It's you I'm concerned about." Leaning forward, she places a kiss on Jason's undamaged cheek. Then she wraps her arms around him, burying her face in his hair as she pulls him into a tight embrace.

Tears leak from Jason's eyes as he clutches Barbara to him. Unnoticed by both of them, Dick quietly leaves the room. After a while, Barbara leans back, though she keeps her hand entwined in Jason's as they separate.

"God, Jason. I can't evenâ€¦" she gives a little laugh, her eyes shining with tears of her own. "I'm so glad you're back. We missed

you so much."

Jason shifts uncomfortably. "I'm fine, Barbara," he says. "I justâ€¦" He can't help but continue to stare at Barbara's wheelchair.

"Hey," Barbara says softly. Gently, she tilts his chin up. "I told you â€" I'm okay." She smiles, though there's a hint of sadness behind it. "I'm not Batgirl anymore though. I'm Oracle now â€" computer expert and hacker. I help Bruce and Dick find information for their cases, as well as doing some detective work of my own." She winks. "Bruce used to get so mad when I hacked into his computer without permission, but he's gotten used to it now. He has to, if he expects me to keep helping him."

Despite his despair at seeing Barbara like this, Jason can't help but smirk at that.

"I'm sorry I didn't come to see you earlier," Barbara says. "I wanted to, but Bruce thought it would be best to wait until you were a bit stronger to see and hear what had happened to me."

"Bruce always thinks he knows best, doesn't he?" says Jason, not bothering to hide his contempt.

Barbara sighs. "He does. But it's only because he cares, Jason."

"People keep telling me that."

"Then you should listen," Barbara teases gently. She glances about them. "I guess Dick left. He's probably downstairs with Tim." She looks back at Jason. "Do you want toâ€¦?" The question dies on her lips as a grimace slips onto Jason's face. "Or you and I can make Dick bring us popcorn before we kick him out and watch bad action movies for the next few hours."

Jason's face lights up. "That sounds like a plan."

So that's exactly what they do for the rest of the day. They laugh, tease, and joke with each other, neither commenting on each other's condition that was inflicted on them by the same lunatic. And for the first time in months, Jason feels a little bit like Jason Todd again.

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**So like I mentioned before, I'm combining the Arkham games canon and normal comic canon. Barbara is around Dick's age in this story, and she and Tim will not be becoming an item (that's just weird, Rocksteady). And the timeline for the Arkham games is kinda wonky in terms of what happens to whom and when, so I'm making it that Barbara was paralyzed a little bit after Jason was taken (like 2 or 3 months after he was). A lot has happened in the past nine months
haha.**

9. Chapter 9

Barbara inspires Jason. She too is a victim of the Joker and "unlike him" is confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life. Jason though, will eventually physically recover. Looking at it from that perspective, Jason feels a sudden need to do more than just sitting around. Like Barbara, he wants to do something with purpose, despite his physical setbacks.

Luckily, Joker had not had time to get to either of Jason's thumbs, forefingers, or his right middle finger. In a way, he supposes he should feel fortunate "at least he's still be able to (somewhat) write. Sighing, Jason turns his hands over, inspecting them.

This _little piggy went to the market..._

SNAP.

And this little piggy stayed home|_

SNAP.

Come on, Bird Boy! Sing along! Didn't good ol' Bats recite this rhyme for you when he tucked you in at night?

Jason shudders, shaking off the memory. He needs something to do.

He goes to the study connecting to the Manor's library. Snatching a stack of papers, a pencil, and a thin book to use as a drawing board, Jason gathers up his materials and sets himself up on the balcony branching off of the library. It's a bright afternoon, and the breeze is just light enough that it keeps Jason cool while at the same time doesn't threaten to rip away his papers.

And so he sketches. He spends hours doing so, as it takes much longer with the limited movement his hands are allowed. By the time the sun is nearly touching the horizon, Jason has four sketches that he's fairly satisfied with, all extremely detailed and meticulously thought through. Surrounding him on the ground are crumpled balls of rejected drawings.

"Master Jason? Master Jason! Where has that boy gone off to now?"

A grin pricks at the edges of Jason's mouth. "I'm on the balcony, Alfred!"

Alfred pulls aside the curtains that had been partially covering the balcony's entrance. Walking over to Jason's side, he bends slightly to inspect the pages spread out across Jason's lap.

"I see you've been practicing your sketching," he comments.

Jason holds one of them up with pride. "It's a helmet. See, Batman has his cowl and his Robins have a simple domino mask. But a helmet? It would protect the head much better against heavy blows. Not only that, but you could put a gas filter in it, you could make it so the wearer can breathe underwater, or it could also be used as a medical scanner to see if the wearer has head injuries. It would be so much more useful. Plus, the wearer's identity is one-hundred percent hidden. I never had much faith in our stupid domino masks' abilities

to conceal our faces all that well." He looks up at Alfred. "What do you think?"

Alfred leans in closer, studying the drawings with a critical eye. "Very impressive, Master Jason. And extremely practical, I must agree." He gestures to the multiple pages. "It seems you have a bit of indecisiveness over the design though."

Jason shrugs. "Yeah." He leafs through the four sketches. Two of them " to Alfred's surprise " have types of bat ears attached to the tops of the helmets. The third one is less extravagant, with a slight indentation for the eyes and the bridge between the nose and mouth. The last is mostly smoothed over, save for the two filters on either side of the mouth. "They're just ideas," Jason mutters, lowering them.

"Rather good ideas, if I may say so."

Jason beams a little at that. Alfred taps his chin, thinking. "Why not try making one of these helmets? It'll be good for you to have a project to work on."

A small grimace slips onto Jason's face. "I don't know. I mean, I can barely manage drawing with my hands. Actually building something? I don't think that's happening, Alfred."

Alfred frowns at Jason. "My dear boy, if you are capable of drawing such detailed sketches as these, you are more than able to work on a project. Yes, it will take longer than usual. It will be difficult, and frustrating. But when has such a challenge ever stopped you before?"

Jason's gaze drops to the drawings, considering. "Alright." He finally says. Then he frowns. "But, how am I supposed to make the 3D digital design on a computer? That's something I definitely need more than half my fingers for."

Alfred smiles. "I believe there's a solution to that."

After choosing one of the designs, Jason and Alfred go to Bruce and talk to him about using the holographic design table in the Batcave. Alfred ends up doing more talking than Jason, but Bruce seems willing enough. He gives Jason a quick course on the updates made to the table and the design program since Jason had used it last, and soon Jason is prodding and poking at the holographic images hovering above the table, fleshing out his design.

For the next week Jason works on his helmet. He takes his time " adjusting a design flaw, fixing a technical glitch, or completely rewriting certain data codes. Using the voice command on the Batcave's computer, he researches which materials would be best to construct the helmet out of, as well as other items that would be needed for it. The work is tiring though, and Jason's body simply isn't yet strong enough to keep up. So he only has a few hours each day to work on the project before he has to stop due to exhaustion.

Whenever Tim comes into the Batcave while Jason is working, the tension noticeably spikes. Jason always makes an effort to ignore Tim, concentrating on his project instead. Taking the hint, Tim gives

Jason his space, though it's clear he's reluctant to do so.

Jason isn't sure why he's so hostile to Tim. Tim isn't a bad kid, and he's not the one who had the ultimate say in him putting on the uniform " that was Bruce. Perhaps that's where the main source of Jason's irritation comes from. Not only had Bruce chosen a replacement in his absence, but he had picked a _good _one. Though Jason hates to admit it, Tim truly is the perfect candidate for Robin. He's smart, talented, and more than capable of any of the physical demands of the job. Yet he also has this certain quietness to him. Not a shy kind; it comes across as more calculating. As though he's constantly assessing the world around him, logging away observations for later recall. He's like this perfect little robot made in a special Robin factory, and it annoys the hell out of Jason.

Jason glances around the Batcave, currently empty of people except for him. Bruce's various memorabilia decorate the enormous open space, and the lights hanging from the ceiling illuminate the computer equipment and numerous Bat-vehicles in their respective places. Jason suddenly feels very small as he looks about. Weary, he shuts down the holographic design table and heads upstairs to bed.

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There it is again. The familiar sound of metal scraping along concrete. It's horrific screeching rings in Jason's ears, making him flinch and curl in on himself. He's sweating hard, despite the iciness of the floor he's lying on.

"Now, now, don't look so worried, Bird Boy."

Terror leaps through Jason as Joker's voice makes its way through his haze of pain.

"This is going to hurt you _a lot more than it does me!"_

Hard metal slams into Jason's ribs, throwing him onto his back. Pain explodes from where he had been hit and he coughs harshly, spitting blood. Before he can properly catch his breath the crowbar strikes him again, now in the thigh. He jerks away, but the assault continues. He's struck over and over. The only sound louder than Jason's cries is Joker's laughter.

"Smile, Jason."

Jason freezes, horror cutting through him. "Bruce?" he chokes out. He lifts his head. There stands Batman, clutching a bloody crowbar and looming over him like something out of a child's nightmare.

"No!" Jason whispers. "Please, Bruce!"

Batman grins madly, his mouth stretching too far for any normal human, and swings the crowbar down " directly at Jason's head.

Jason jolts awake with a strangled gasp, tangling his legs in the bedsheets as he struggles to orient himself. After a few seconds he

begins to calm, the dark outlines of his bedroom gradually coming into focus. Taking in ragged breaths, Jason pushes himself into a sitting position, wiping at his sweaty and tear-streaked face. He leans forward, wrapping his arms around himself and blinking hard into the blackness of the night.

It was just a dream. Come on, Jason. Get a hold of yourself.

Shaking his head, Jason's breathing begins to calm. Moaning, he presses his hands to his eyes, trying to force the images of the nightmare out of his head so he can go back to sleep. Minutes pass, and Jason finally comes to terms with the fact that he won't be dozing off anytime soon. Wincing at the pain sparking from his wrist and ribs, Jason pushes himself to the edge of the bed, where his wheelchair waits. He's gotten quite good at getting out of bed and into it by now, even if his still-bruised body objects painfully every time he does so.

As Jason enters the hallway, he glances around him for any sign of life. Aside from the distant ticking of a large grandfather clock from the far end of the hall, everything is quiet. Taking solace in the privacy that the night provides, Jason makes his way to the first floor of Wayne Manor and heads towards the south entrance.

The night is warm and the stars blink down curiously at Jason as he carefully maneuvers his way through the gardens inhabiting the backyard of Wayne Manor. He doesn't stop to admire the perfectly managed greenery, instead keeping his eyes on the building directly ahead of him.

Before him stands the Wayne Manor greenhouse, its glass walls and ceiling glimmering faintly in the moonlight. It looks still enough, so Jason goes inside, shutting the door tightly behind him.

Inside a plethora of plants, trees, and vegetation dominates the greenhouse, consuming its walls and stretching up to claim the high ceiling. It's humid inside, but Jason doesn't mind. Anything to rid himself of the chill clinging to his body.

Wondering if it's still there, Jason heads to the center of the greenhouse. He moves around a large orange tree and comes to an opening in the vegetation, where a large water fountain proudly stands. Nostalgia perks up in him as he sees that it's exactly as he had remembered from when he had ventured here years ago. Delicately carved from white marble, moonlight spills onto the decades old stone.

Perched on the pillar in the middle of the fountain is a rather beautiful angel. Her wings fold around her gracefully as she leans forward, gazing into her reflection in the pool of water surrounding her. Water trickles from her hand into the fountain below.

Jason stares at the angel, keeping as still as the plants surrounding him. Then out of the corner of his eye, he spots a dark figure sitting on the opposite side of the fountain. Jason's heart stops for the smallest moment, but he quickly recovers from the surprise and edges closer, squinting into the darkness to get a clearer view of the person. The person is sitting on a bench that faces the fountain, and they're bent over, staring down at their arms resting on their

legs as though in mourning.

Curious, Jason tries to make his way towards the figure as quietly as possible. But in the silence of the night and the occasional crackling of leaves beneath his wheelchair, it's no surprise when the person's head jerks up to look at him before he even gets halfway around the fountain.

"Jason," Tim says, wiping at his face. "Sorry, I didn't know you were here."

Jason frowns. Not only because he's annoyed that it's Tim he stumbled upon, but he can't help but notice that Tim's voice sounds off. It's tired, but thicker too, like how one's voice sounds after they've been crying.

Jason stops his approach. "S'okay, I just got here. Didn't think anyone else was around." He pauses, not wanting to ask but knowing he'd feel like a total asshole if he didn't. "Youâ€|alright?"

"What?" Tim brushes at his pajama shirt with a flustered air. "Yeah. Yeah, of course."

Jason comes a bit closer and notices the obvious red puffiness of Tim's eyes. _Oh, great. This is the last thing I need to deal with right now._ He holds back a sigh as he speaks next. "You sure?"

Tim glares at Jason. "_Yes_. Okay?"

Jason shrugs. "Sorry. Just asking."

"Why do you care?" asks Tim, the words holding a distinct bite to them. "All you've done since we've met is treat me like some ignorant child who's beneath you. I know you're pissed at me being Robin, and I totally get why. But, _like I said_, I'm more than willing to give it back to you when you're ready. So justâ€|" His breath leaves him in a frustrated huff. "_Lay off_."

Jason blinks, surprised at the outburst. He's quiet for a moment. Scrunching up his nose at the words he doesn't want to say but knows he should, a defeated sigh escapes him. "Timâ€|I'm sorry, okay? I know I've been a Class A jerk to you." Tim's eyebrows raise. Jason almost feels his own do the same â€" he can't believe he's saying this. But he continues anyway. "You haven't done anything to me, and it's wrong of me to treat you like I have been. Soâ€|I'm sorry."

Tim stares at Jason, surprise clear on his face. "Uhâ€|thanks."

Jason just shrugs. He looks away, returning his attention to the angel standing over the fountain. Tim follows his gaze, and for a good few minutes they simply sit there, watching as water falls from the angel's hand into the rippling pool below.

"I came here a lot when I was Robin," Jason eventually says. "Whenever it had been a particularly bad day on patrol, or after I had gotten a severe lecture from Bruce, I'd come here. I'd sit on this bench and I'd talk to the angel as though she could actually listen to me. She was always patient, never yelled. She just stood

there, giving me all the attention I could ever need." Jason laughs softly. "Sometimes I wondered if Dick had done the same before me. But I doubt Dick needed stone carvings to vent his frustrations to." What the hell is he saying? He doesn't know this kid, so why is he telling him all this?_ Damnâ€¦I must be so tired. _He rubs the back of his head. "Geez, sorry. I must sound so stupid right now."

For a long while, Tim doesn't say anything. He taps his fingers against the edge of the bench and shuffles his feet, gravel crunching beneath his movements. The trickling of the fountain seems to get louder as the silence drags on. Finally, Tim speaks. "Dick says he already told you, but my dad was killed two months ago." He stares at the ground as he talks, his voice low. "I come out here sometimes after Bruce and I get back from patrol and I'll just sit here, talking to my dad as though he were standing up there on that pillar beside the angel." He fidgets with his hands. "Sometimes I wonderâ€¦if I hadn't been Robin, if I had been home with himâ€¦maybe I could've stopped it." He runs his hands through his hair, letting out a shaky breath.

_Holy shit. It is way too late for this. _Jason rubs his face wearily. _I am nowhere near qualified for this talk. _He releases a sigh. "Look. Guilt isn't going to get you anywhere. Maybe you could have done something, or maybe you would've been killed too." He pauses, trying to figure out his next words. "Justâ€¦don't worry about something you can't change. Especially if it isn't your fault â€" which it wasn't."

Tim gives Jason an odd look. Something similar to surprise maybe, but Jason's far too exhausted to pinpoint the emotion.

"Thanks, Jason."

Jason shrugs.

They sit in silence for a few minutes.

"Jason?"

"Mm?" Jason blinks tiredly in Tim's general direction.

Tim shifts awkwardly. "What you said last week, about not wanting to be Robin anymoreâ€¦did you mean it?"

Jason takes a while to answer. He stares at the angel, considering. "Yeah," he finally answers. "I did."

"Why? I thought that was one of the things you cared most about."

Jason shakes his head, more to himself than to Tim. "No." And he surprises himself as he realizes that he means it. "Not anymore. I justâ€¦I don't think I can go back to it." He mulls over his words, thinking. "I'd rather start fresh, become my own person. I want to do the same thing as Batman and Robin, but on my own terms. As something new, better." He yawns. "You know?"

Tim watches him with a curious expression.

"Anyway," Jason mutters sleepily. "Batman seems to have found himself

a good enough replacement." He freezes. Did those words just come out of his mouth? He looks over at Tim and sees the look of disbelief and utter gratefulness in his eyes. And suddenly, a part of him doesn't feel so stupid for saying it now.

Jason tilts his head back and stares up through the glass ceiling at the night sky. Smiling slightly, Tim follows suit. They stay there, quiet, for a long time.

10. Chapter 10

"Where is it?" Tim mutters, desperately glancing left and right as he strides down the hallway. Groaning in frustration, he sees the door leading to the library and heads for it, unable to think of anywhere else to search.

He pushes open the door (nearly slams it open, if Tim is going to be honest with himself) and stops dead in his tracks. Jumping slightly in his wheelchair from the sudden intrusion, Jason's head jerks up, tearing his attention away from a book he's reading.

"Oh. Hi." Tim shifts his feet, unsure whether it'd be more awkward to stay or to bolt in the following second.

Jason scrunches up his face slightly. "Hi," he says back. His tone isn't exactly hostile, so Tim stays put. For the moment.

Glancing around him, Tim pounds his fist against his thigh. "I, uh, I'm looking for a notebook of mine. I left it somewhere but I can't remember where, and I'm working on something that I need it for, and—" He stops, realizing that he's rambling. He gives a small cough. "Anyway. You haven't seen it, have you?"

"Nope."

There's a beat of silence.

"Oh. Alright then." Biting his lip, Tim looks back to the door that he just came through. "K, well, guess I'll see you round then."

Jason's eyes have already returned to his book. "Guess so."

As he turns towards the door, Tim raises his hand in a weird half-wave, half-salute kind of gesture. "K. Bye then." He stops, his hand resting on the doorknob. "Hey, Jason." Jason looks back up from his book, his eyes only carrying a mild glimmer of annoyance. That's good enough for Tim, who continues. "I um, well, I'm working on this case I just started yesterday and—" His breath leaves him in an exasperated puff. "You want to come down to the Batcave and help me with it?"

Any irritation in Jason's eyes is quickly replaced by raw surprise. "What?"

"A case," Tim repeats. "If you want to, I'd like some help with it."

Jason raises his eyebrows, his book lowering to his lap. He studies Tim for a moment, and then snaps the book shut. "Sure, why not?"

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, whatever."

Tim's face brightens as a smile stretches across it. "Great!" He stands back, holding the door open for Jason, who shakes his head and moves his wheelchair in Tim's direction. "I've got everything downstairs already. Except for my notebook, which has some stuff I'd written on the case in it. But I guess we â€"

"It's in the bookshelf by the window. Lying on top of the forensic textbooks."

Tim stares at Jason, who by now is through the doorway and heading down the hall towards the elevator.

"You coming?" Jason calls, and Tim is certain he hears a faint layer of smugness in Jason's voice.

Realizing his mouth is partially agape, Tim snaps it shut and rushes inside the library, snatching the notebook off of the forensic textbooks. By the time he makes it to the elevator, Jason is already inside and waiting, his fingers hovering over the down button. There's a hint of a smirk playing across his lips as he looks up at Tim.

"Let's go then," says Jason. He presses the button.

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Bruce sighs tiredly as he shrugs out of his business suit jacket. He had just sat through a particularly long Wayne Enterprises meeting, and though he's longing to get some rest, he knows there's work down in the Batcave that needs to be attended to.

The elevator jerks to halt and the doors open into the Batcave, revealing a surprising sight.

"No look, the victim was standing here. But the blood spray â€"

"Arterial spray."

"I know what arterial spray is, Tim."

"I never said you didn't. I'm just â€"

"_Back _to what I was saying. Even though the victim was standing by the fireplace when their throat was cut, their _arterial spray_ should have hit the grandfather clock to the left of them. But it didn't."

"There probably was a person standing next to them when their carotid artery was slashed."

"And they got splattered instead. So there had to have been at least

two perpetrators in the room during the murder."

"I wanna take a look at the transfer patterns left by the footprints again. Maybe there was a third attacker. Hand 'em over."

"Where'd you put them?"

"Over there â€"

"What's going on?"

Tim and Jason look up from the computer desk they're pulled up to. Files, documents, and photos surround the boys, some of the pages showing extensive markings and notes. Bruce steps up to the desk and drapes his jacket over the back of an empty chair.

"Hi, Bruce," Tim says. "Jason and I are working on the Donaghue case I started yesterday."

"I see that." Bruce crosses his arms over the back of the chair and leans forward. He glances at Jason, whose eyes drop back down to the scattered crime scene photos. "How's it going?"

"Pretty good," Tim answers.

"Glad to hear it." Bruce focuses his attention back on Tim. "But it's going to have to be put on hold for a little bit. We need to follow up on that lead we got last night."

Jason stiffens at that. Glancing nervously at his predecessor, Tim nods in Bruce's direction. "Sure. I'llâ€|I'll go change."

Bruce looks back at Jason as Tim disappears into the elevator. "Jason â€"

"I should get going too," Jason interrupts, still avoiding Bruce's gaze. "I umâ€|got something I'm working on. Not here. Iâ€|I can do it in my room." His jaw tightening, Jason maneuvers his wheelchair around Bruce and towards the elevator leading to his room.

Bruce opens his mouth, but nothing comes out to stop Jason as he goes into the elevator and ascends to the upper levels. Sighing, Bruce looks back down at the work Jason and Tim had done together. He wants to feel pride, but all that seems to be prodding at him is guilt. Clenching his hands, he leaves to change into his uniform.

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The next few days are the busiest Jason has had since he's been back at Wayne Manor. In the morning, when Bruce and Tim are still sleeping, Jason goes down to the Batcave to work on his helmet. It's coming along slowly, which annoys him to some degree. But like Alfred suggested, Jason decides to take his time with it and instead focuses on working even the smallest details to perfection.

The afternoons are occupied with Tim and Jason working on the Donaghue case. And as the hours pass in lengthy discussions and occasional bickering, the awkward tension between them seems to dissipate a bit more each day. However, every day when dinnertime nears, Jason always manages to come up with some lame excuse to leave

the Batcave before Bruce comes down and tells Tim it's almost time for patrol. His hasty exits don't fool Tim for a second, and Tim's not sure they're even meant to. But he always plays along, knowing it's what's best for everyone for the time being.

Finally the day of the charity ball arrives. Jason wakes to the sound of hired cleaners and decorators working fervently in the distant parts of the Manor, putting together the decorations and various banquet tables for the event. He takes his time getting up, seeing no reason to rush and having to risk bumping into any strangers on his way down to breakfast.

When he opens the door to the kitchen sometime later, he's greeted by the sight of both Tim and Dick sitting at the table, eating a rather large breakfast of bacon, eggs, and toast.

"Jason!" Dick exclaims brightly as soon as the door opens.
"Hey!"

"When you'd get back from Blüdhaven?" Jason asks, frowning at the older man as he moves his wheelchair to the empty side of the table.

"Like twenty minutes ago," Dick answers. He scoops a large bite of eggs into his mouth.

"Want some breakfast?" Tim stands and grabs a fresh plate, filling it with food. Jason nods his thanks as Tim sets the plate down in front of him.

"So how long are we expected to hang out at this ballâ€|thing?" Jason examines his toast, turning it over a few times before using it to push his eggs into a pile.

Dick shrugs. "Alfred would say all of it. I say until we run out of people to greet and things to eat."

"Howâ€|childish of you," Tim mutters, bringing a glass of orange juice up to his lips.

A grin spreads across Dick's lips. "Who's the youngest one here again, Timmy boy?"

"Who's the most mature?" Tim counters.

Dick laughs. "Come on, now. I think I've come into adulthood most gracefully."

Tim snorts, to which Dick kicks his shin from beneath the table.

Jason watches the two of them, trying to ignore the uncomfortable feeling stirring in his stomach. It's obvious that the two have built a special bond over the past months Tim has been Robin. Months that he wasn't here to be a part of. Normally, he would shrug the thought off with an air of dismissiveness, but nowâ€|he can't help but feel a small twinge of yearning.

Trying to not look at awkward as he felt, Jason pokes at his breakfast with his fork.

"Hey Jason, did the suit Bruce buy you for tonight come in yet?" Dick asks.

Jason jerks his head up, blinking. "Huh? Oh. Yeah, it did."

"Great." Dick leans back casually. "So I guess we've got some hours to spare until then. You guys have anything else planned for the day?"

Tim shakes his head. "No. Jason and I were probably going to continue working on the Donaghue case."

"Yeah, Bruce told me about that. How's it going?"

"Good," Tim answers. "We've got some pretty solid leads."

Dick smiles. "Awesome. Can I see your work so far?"

Tim seems rather enthusiastic to show Dick what he and Jason had been doing, but Jason is less excited about the idea. As they take the elevator down to the Batcave, Jason can't help but feel bitterness creep up in him. This is a project he and Tim have been working on. Having Dick come in on it, it feels like an intrusion. And, as stupid as he feels thinking it, a part of him worries that somehow Dick might disrupt this new flow he and Tim had begun to get into. Well, it's not like he wants to be Tim's best friend or anything, but he's seen how Tim and Dick act around each other. There's something there that he simply won't ever be able to be a part of. Tim leads them over to the computer desk in the Batcave, and Jason can't help this edging fear in the back of his mind — that due to Dick's presence, he might be forgotten.

"This is impressive work, you two," Dick says, inspecting the now neatly arranged files and pictures placed on the desk. He leafs through some of the crime scene photos, nodding to himself as he studies them. "Nicely done." He sets down the evidence and takes a look around the cave. His gaze falls on the Batplane. "I wonder if Bruce would kill us if we took it for a spin."

"Why don't you try it out and see?" says Tim. "Jason and I will stay here and be sure to rat you out."

Dick laughs. "I suppose we shouldn't." He glances at the holographic design table and pauses, noticing the few pages Jason had left there. "Is someone working on the hologram table?"

"Jason is," says Tim. Jason shoots Tim a glare, but Tim doesn't seem to be all that intimidated by it. "He's been working on a project."

Interest sparks in Dick's eyes. "Like what?"

Tim nudges Jason, who delivers a hard whack to Tim's stomach. Ignoring Tim's wince, Jason just shrugs at Dick's questioning gaze. "It's just — it doesn't matter."

"Sure it does," Dick says. "Besides, we've got nothing else to do."

Jason taps his fingers against his wheelchair's armrest, thinking. Finally he sighs and moves up to the hologram table. Dick and Tim draw closer as Jason turns on the table and brings up his project.

Dick's eyes shine with excitement as the image of the helmet hovers above the table. "Jason, that's fantastic!"

"Really?" Jason says in honest surprise. "You think?"

"Yeah." Dick leans closer to get a better look. "Can you show me the inside of it?"

So Jason spends the next half an hour explaining to Dick and Tim every function and accessory he had made for the helmet, as well as telling them about the different materials he was considering to construct it out of. Dick and Tim's eyes light up in interest as Jason goes on, and Jason is struck by how sincere they both are in wanting to know about it. He's never seen Dick show so much pride in anything he's done before. Jason's not sure how to feel about this seeing Dick like this. It's all he had ever wanted ever since he had first put on that damn Robin uniform. And now that he seems to finally have some of what he had always been yearning for, he's completely lost as how to react to it.

When he finishes, both Dick and Tim immediately spout out praises about the project. Jason sits stunned as he listens to them, and when they're finally done he suddenly doesn't feel quite as annoyed that Dick is down in the Batcave with him and Tim.

Not having anything else to do, they decide to spend the rest of late morning and early afternoon in the upstairs game room. Well, more accurately it's Dick and Tim who decide to, while Jason insists that he'd rather just read by himself. But Dick pretty much forces Jason to come along, and once they actually start playing the games, Jason's tension starts to ebb. They play pool, air hockey, ping pong, and every other game they can find, laughing and shouting humorous insults at each other as they do so. Jason is noticeably more quiet than the other two, but that doesn't seem to deter Dick's efforts to keep him in the conversation.

By the time Alfred comes to get them they're all gathered around the TV watching some cheesy crime drama, happily tearing into all of its inaccuracies. Jason has his wheelchair positioned a bit farther away from the sofa seating Dick and Tim than necessary, but simply seeing him joining in is enough to satisfy Alfred. Turning off the TV, Alfred quickly ushers them downstairs to prepare for the charity ball.

Alone in his room, Jason twists in his wheelchair, trying to ignore the painful throbbing coming from his ribs as he struggles to pull off his t-shirt. He's sweating slightly, and frustration spikes in him as his wrist's cast gets caught.

"Jason, you ready?"

Jason's breath hitches as Dick opens the door, peeking his head in. His face turning a bright red, Jason clumsily tries to yank his shirt down. But it's too late. Dick's eyes widen as they catch sight of Jason's torso, and he steps into the room, letting the door shut

behind him.

"Jasonâ€|" he breathes, horror clinging to his voice.

Jason grits his teeth at the look in Dick's eyes. The last thing he wants is Dick's sympathy.

"Don't you know how to knock?" snarls Jason. He once more tugs at his shirt, but it's struck fast. His breath leaves him in a frustrated puff as he gives his body another twist.

Dick hesitates a moment, watching Jason. Then he cautiously walks over to Jason's side, keeping his hands out as one would when approaching a wounded animal. "Jason, let me help."

"Piss off, Dick," Jason snaps. "I don't need your pity."

"It's not pity, it's practicality."

Jason ignores him.

Dick's jaw tightens. "Jason, can't you for once in your life _not _be your stubborn self? I'm offering my help â€"

"And I _said _I don't need it!"

"Jason." The name is spoken softly, but firmly. Dick levels his gaze with Jason's. "Come on."

Jason stares down at his legs, his whole body tense. He releases a huff of defeat. "Fine."

Holding in a relieved sigh, Dick reaches out and grasps the bottom hem of Jason's shirt. Gently, he lifts it up and helps Jason shrug it off. Dick stiffens as Jason's torso is exposed to him, and his grip on Jason's shirt tightens so much that his knuckles begin to lose their color.

It's been nearly a month since Jason's rescue, but despite that some bruising still remains. Black, blue, and yellow mold together, wrapping around Jason's healing ribs and standing out starkly against his pale skin. Surrounding the bruises are countless lacerations â€" some just barely healed, others a dark pink, and some bright white scars. The cuts zig-zag across Jason's skin, all varying in length, but all looking as though they had been extremely painful when inflicted.

Heat flares up in Jason's face as Dick stares, and he shifts uncomfortably, looking away. "Dick," he says quietly. "It doesn't matter."

"Of _course _it matters, Jason!" Dick chokes out. "Of course it â€" what the hellâ€"of _course_ â€" Dick is shaking, and when Jason glances back at him he's surprised to see pure _rage _in Dick's eyes.

"Dick â€"

"If I everâ€"when I see that piece ofâ€|" Dick barely manages to grind out the words, so shocked and horrified he is to see Jason like

this.

With surprising calmness, Jason pulls his shirt out of Dick's clenched fists. "Just help me get this stupid suit on, Dick." The weariness in Jason's voice is what pulls Dick back to reality. Looking at Jason with a pained expression, Dick finally nods. They finish dressing Jason in silence, and when it time for them to head downstairs, Dick reaches down and gives Jason's right forearm a gentle squeeze. Jason does not return the gesture in any way, but he doesn't exactly try to reject it either.

"Ready to go?" Tim asks as they enter the hallway. The dull chatter of dozens of already arrived guests inks its way up the stairs from the grand ballroom below.

"Yeah," Jason says, his voice clear and steady. "Let's go."

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**I know this chapter is kinda dull. But I felt that developing Jason's relationship with Tim and Dick some more was important. It'll pick up soon. ;) **

11. Chapter 11

Jason can't remember the last time he had been around so many people. There must be at least three hundred guests in Wayne Manor's grand ballroom, and though the room was designed to hold such vast numbers, Jason can't help but feel uncomfortably crowded.

Dick and Tim walk on either side of Jason as the three of them make their way through the mass. Unlike Tim and Dick, who smile and wave at various guests, Jason is quiet, focusing on avoiding eye contact with any of the strangers surrounding him. Minutes pass like hours, and Jason starts to wonder if he should have rejected Bruce's offer to come after all.

"Richard Grayson!"

All three boys turn their heads in the direction the shout had come from. A portly man with graying hair and a thick mustache strides towards them, a wide, almost goofy, grin stretched across his face.

"Hello Senator Conway," Dick says, flashing a friendly smile. He steps forward and lays a hand on Jason's shoulder. Jason wants to shrug him off, but he knows it would look bad. So he simply tenses in his seat, trying not to appear hostile to the approaching senator.

"Hello, my boy!" Senator Conway exclaims, grinning at Dick. He reaches out and gives the hand Dick isn't resting on Jason a vigorous shake. "My, it's been a long time! How are you?"

"Fine, thanks," Dick says. He gestures to Tim and Jason. "These are my brothers, Jason and Tim."

I'm not your brother, Jason thinks. But the thought is half-hearted at best, and he manages to make a convincing enough smile up at the senator.

"Ah yes, the newest additions to the Wayne household," Senator Conway says. He looks at Jason, taking in the sight of the casts encasing Jason's leg, wrist, and fingers, as well as the bandage on his cheek. "My goodness, young man. You seem to have had quite the accident."

Accident. Jason grimaces. His mind goes blank, and he can't think of a response for that.

"It was a car crash," Dick says. "Jason had been hit by a drunk driver while he had been studying abroad in Europe."

Senator Conway nods sadly. "Ah. How unfortunate. I do hope the rest of your time abroad had been better spent? I always try to encourage young people such as yourselves to travel as much as possible. You never forget experiences like those, right my boy?"

Jason swallows hard. "No," he says weakly. "You don't."

Dick's hand tightens on Jason's shoulder.

Seemingly oblivious to Jason's discomfort, Senator Conway gives another jolly nod. "Well, I should go mingle with the other guests. Have fun, boys!"

As the senator walks away, Dick and Tim glance down at Jason. "You okay, Jason?" Dick asks.

"Fine," Jason answers tightly. He brushes Dick's hand off. "I just wish Bruce wasn't such a stiff and would let us drink the champagne."

Dick smirks at that.

"Come on," Tim says. "I'm starving. Let's head over to the banquet table."

"Jason! Dick, Tim!"

All three of their faces brighten as they see who had called out to them. Wearing a turquoise dress and a bright smile, Barbara wheels over to the boys, looking absolutely thrilled to see all of them there.

"Hey Barbara," Jason grins.

Barbara reaches out and grasps Jason's hand, beaming at him. "I'm so glad you decided to come, Jason."

"Hello, boys."

Commissioner Gordon steps up to his daughter's side, giving a warm smile of his own in greeting.

"Evening, Commissioner," Dick says.

Gordon's eyes fall on Jason. "Mr. Wayne told me about your car accident," he says solemnly. "I'm sorry to hear that had happened. But you seem to be a strong young man; hopefully you'll recover quickly."

Every word spoken is of the utmost sincerity. Jason appreciates that about Commissioner Gordon; despite all the fakers and liars in Gotham, Gordon has always been a steadfast, honest man. Jason smiles gratefully. "Thank you, Commissioner."

Gordon nods and returns his attention to all three of the boys. "Sorry to leave so abruptly, but I have some people I should be seeking out. Social conventions and all." He gives Barbara a kiss on the head. "Have a good time, Barbara. It was nice seeing you again, boys." Giving a small wave, Gordon disappears into the crowd, leaving the four together.

Dick leans down and gives Barbara a quick peck on the cheek. "Alfred told me you three were playing hooky all day today," she teases, grinning up at Dick.

Dick holds a hand to his chest, displaying exaggerated offense. "That's such a strong word, Babs. Actually, we spent a good chunk of it expanding our detective skills knowledge."

Tim snorts. "If you think 90's crime dramas are in any way educational, Blüdhaven is in serious trouble."

A laugh bursts from Dick's lips.

Tim's eyes slide over to where the banquet table stands against the far wall. "Hey, weren't we going to get something to eat?"

"Ugh, yes please," Barbara says. "I'm starved."

They head over to the table and grab plates, nudging each other out of the way as they grabble for the variety of food spread out before them.

"Hello, friends, and welcome."

The four turn towards a stage that had been set up at the front of the ballroom. A mic had been placed there, and standing behind it was Bruce. Wearing a crisp suit and standing with a confident air, he certainly looked the part of a powerful billionaire.

"I'd like to thank all of the generous support that we've had in preparation for tonight's charity ball."

Dick, Jason, Tim, and Barbara move to the side so as to be out the way and eat silently, watching as Bruce delivers the expected speech to the expansive crowd. It's rather short though, and soon everyone is back to chatting and mingling as they had before, classical music provided by a hired chamber orchestra drifting its way through the masses.

"Dick, Tim."

All four of them look up from their plates to see Bruce coming towards them, a grim expression on his face.

"What's up, Bruce?" Dick asks, suspicion in his eyes.

Bruce keeps his voice low as he nears them. "Something's come up. I need you to change, now."

All humor gone from their eyes, Dick and Tim nod curtly and begin to weave their way towards the staircase, discarding their plates along the way.

"Barbara, we'll need you downstairs. Alfred's staying here to monitor the guests."

Barbara nods.

Jason looks down at his plate, no longer very hungry. He turns to disappear into the crowd when Bruce's voice stops him.

"Jason, you too."

Freezing, Jason twists back around to Bruce, his eyebrows drawing together. "What?"

"Downstairs. With Barbara." Bruce gestures towards the elevator. "Go."

Shock andâ€|_exhilaration _rise in Jason's chest as he follows Barbara into the hallway where the elevator waits.

"Okay, you've never done a mission on this side of the communication lines before, but just do as I say and you'll be fine," Barbara says as they enter into the Batcave and head towards the computer. Her voice is serious and authoritative, much different from its tone only minutes ago. The large arc of screens above their heads blink to life, and soon Barbara is pulling up various programs for tracking, heat sensing, and map layouts.

Jason watches everything she does carefully, logging the information away and teaching himself as she works.

The elevator opens once more and Dick and Tim come out, both in their uniforms. Seeing Tim takes Jason aback for a moment, and he forgets to follow along with Barbara. He's never seen Tim in his Robin uniform, and Jason isn't sure how to feel as he watches Tim walk over in it now.

The uniform is different. The color scheme has changed, abandoning the green, and its design looksâ€|slicker. It hardly looks like something a fifteen-year-old would be wearing, but somehow Tim manages not to look like a child playing dress-up. Jason feels his insides clench up as he studies Tim; even though he has no desire to be Robin again, he can't ignore the sting he feels at seeing someone else wearing that bright yellow _R_.

Tim catches Jason's gaze and seems to shrink in on himself somewhat. Suddenly looking much more awkward than he had when he had come out of the elevator, Tim tries to send Jason something close to a

reassuring smile. It comes off as a rather strained grimace. Jason turns back to Barbara, trying not to look as tense as he felt.

"About fifty of Black Mask's men are stationed at an old warehouse on Fifth Avenue."

Jason's head swivels around to look at Bruce as he walks up to meet them, dressed in his Batman uniform. Jason blinks; he hadn't even heard Bruce come down. But that's something Jason is used to; how many times had it happened when he had been Robin?

"They have a large shipment of C4 that is supposed to be picked up by a buyer tonight." Bruce gestures to the map of the warehouse Barbara has already pulled up. "The sell wasn't supposed to be made until tomorrow, but I've been keeping track of that neighborhood block all week. About twenty minutes ago Black Mask's men, led by a man named Jeremiah Stoke, started to arrive. Something must have come up that changed their minds." He begins walking towards the Batplane, Dick and Tim following. "Barbara, Jason, I need you to be our eyes and ears as we infiltrate the warehouse. That C4 cannot leave Gotham."

"Got it, Bruce," says Barbara.

Seconds later, the Batplane is roaring out of the cave.

"Once Bruce, Dick, and Tim leave the Batplane, we're going to fly it remotely," Barbara says. "We'll use its heat scanner so we'll know exactly where every living thing in that warehouse is at any time. Here." She pulls up three more videos onto the left monitor. All three of them show the inside of the Batplane from slightly different angles and locations.

"The head cameras in Bruce's cowl and Dick and Tim's masks," Jason comments.

Barbara nods. "They'll help us see what's going on inside."

It only takes seven minutes for the Batplane to reach the warehouse.

"Oracle, take the yoke." Batman's voice comes in loud, if carrying a bit of static, through the computer's speakers.

"On it." Barbara presses a button off to the side of the keyboard. A compartment beneath the computer desk opens, and a copy yoke comes out, stopping before Barbara's outstretched hands. Grasping it, Barbara pulls the Batplane in closer to the warehouse building. She presses two other buttons, and the top of the plane opens; Batman, Nightwing, and Robin all stand, preparing to jump.

"How many hostiles are on the fourth floor?" Nightwing asks.

Barbara glances back at Jason, giving him a look. Jason blinks, and then snaps his gaze to the heat scanner. "There's uh, five in the room you're in front of," says Jason. "Ten more down the hall. Five on the northern stairwell."

"Pfft," Nightwing snorts. "Child's play." Through Robin's camera,

Jason watches as Nightwing pulls out his Escrima sticks.

"Focus, Nightwing," says Batman. "Alright â€" go!"

All three launch themselves from the plane at the same moment. Jason watches through the Batplane's camera as they fly through the air, all in perfect formation. Batman is the first to hit the window in front of them; his boots smash into the glass, shattering it. Rolling into the room, he immediately jumps at one of the surprised men standing there, delivering a swift kick to the man's ankles and taking his feet out from under him.

Landing behind Batman, Nightwing and Robin rush at the other men in the room, dodging the expected spray of bullets and easily taking out the flustered men. Barbara and Jason watch, switching their attention from head cameras, to the heat sensors, to the plane's camera in order to keep track.

With the room now secure, Batman, Robin, and Nightwing go into the hallway to meet the next swarm of Black Mask's men. Keeping his voice even, Jason leads the three through the warehouse, warning them where hostiles are at every turn. Their work is swift and efficient, and Jason can't deny the tug of nostalgia he feels as he watches them.

They work their way to the sixth floor of the warehouse building, where twenty men stand around a stack of carefully marked crates. The moment Batman, Nightwing, and Robin burst into the room chaos erupts. Shouts can be heard through the radio link, along with gunshots and hard thuds. It's impossible to get a clear picture of what is happening through any of the head cameras, so Jason and Barbara follow along with the heat sensor on the Batplane, which Barbara guides along the outside of the building.

Grueling minutes pass, but eventually there are only five of Black Mask's thugs left. Nightwing and Robin take on two each, while Batman launches himself at the apparent leader.

"Stand down, Stoke," Batman growls, his voice echoing through the computer's speakers. "You've already lost."

"I don't surrender to freaks like you," spits Stoke. Through Batman's head camera, Jason watches Stoke look in Robin's direction. "Still dragging children into these games, Batman?" Stoke sneers. He throws a punch at Batman, but it's easily deflected. "Especially after what happened to the last one?"

Jason stiffens. Barbara's hand is on his arm in an instant, and all the two can do is sit there, watching.

Batman seems to falter slightly at that. Jason sees a malicious grin spread across Stoke's face. "Didn't think anyone knew about that, did you?" He laughs. "One of Joker's men was telling me about it. How Joker peeled the flesh from the boy's bones. He said the kid's screams could be heard through â€"

Batman delivers a sharp blow to the thug's jaw, sending him reeling backwards. He stumbles into a discarded crate and loses his balance, crashing to the ground. Batman is on him in a second, wrapping his hands around the man's throat. Stoke's face takes up the majority of

Batman's head camera, though Batman's clenched hands can be seen tightening their grip around his neck.

"Say one more word and I'll crush your larynx," Batman hisses. There's a tense moment, both men frozen in place. Then, his movements fast and hard, Batman releases one of his hands and swings it around, viciously punching the man in the face. The thug's head snaps back, striking the wooden floor. Batman stands and steps back from the unconscious man.

Barbara slowly releases her grip on Jason.

"Ê|Jason?" Batman asks.

Jason wets his lips with his tongue. "I'm here, Batman."

A second passes, and all Jason can hear is Bruce's heavy breathing through the comm.

There's the sound of a final punch being landed, and Jason and Barbara watch through Robin's camera as the last thug falls to the floor, knocked out cold.

"That's the last of them," says Robin.

Batman's camera moves in a way that Jason assumes is a nod. "Good," comes in Batman's voice, as serious and void of emotion as ever. "Let's secure them. The buyer's men should be coming any minute."

The rest of the mission goes as cleanly as expected. Batman, Nightwing, and Robin easily take out the ten men sent to collect the C4, as well as managing to get the name of the buyer from one of the frightened thugs. Then Commissioner Gordon is called and the men are taken away, along with the C4.

As the Batplane flies back, Batman once again at the yoke, Barbara turns to Jason.

"You did great, Jason," she says proudly. "I'll teach you how to use the yoke next, if you want."

"I have a pretty good idea already, watching you," says Jason.

Barbara smiles. "You'll pick it up fast. You've always been a quick learner."

Jason tries to grin back, but his heart isn't in it. His mind still dwells on the jabs Stoke had made at Batman. It's unnerving, to hear someone not connected to Joker speaking about it.

"Jason?" Barbara asks, her face falling as she studies Jason's expression.

Jason shakes his head and manages to flash something of a smile at her. "Sorry. I, uhÊ|am just really tired. My ribs are killing me. If there's nothing else to do, I think I'll head to bed."

Barbara nods, though her eyes are filled with concern. "UhÊ|no.

You're good to go."

"Thanks." He moves towards the elevator leading to his room. "See you later, Barbara." Then he's gone, leaving a worried Barbara to greet Batman, Nightwing, and Robin upon their return to the Batcave.

12. Chapter 12

****WARNING: TRIGGER HEAVY STUFF IN THIS CHAPTER.** The first scene of this chapter includes a character getting hold of a blade, self-harm threats, and some dark emotional stuff.**

****This is only relevant up till the break between the chapter's two scenes.** If you don't feel comfortable reading this first part of this chapter but would like to know what happens plot-wise, go ahead and shoot me a message. :)**

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Jason brushes his teeth in the bathroom connected to his bedroom, Stoke's words echoing in his head. Now that he thinks it over, of course word would get out amongst the scum of Gotham that Joker had Batman's little Robin. Of course they would laugh as Joker's men bragged about the beatings they had been allowed in on, about the screams that they could hear through that iron door sealing Jason off. Even if had Joker instructed them not to say anything, it's guaranteed that at least some of the men would do so anyway, in order to feel even just a twinge of sick pride as they talked to whatever acquaintances they have. Witnessing and participating in the torture of Batman's partner? What thug wouldn't want to brag about that? Fury and shame mix inside Jason as he thinks of all that complete strangers had witnessed in his most vulnerable moments.

Setting down his toothbrush, Jason stares at the bandage covering his left cheek. He lifts a hand, hovering it within a breath's inch of touching it, wondering. It's been weeks since the brand was inflicted on him, and he still has not been able to bring himself to look at it even once. He wonders how much it has healed. He wonders how bad it looks, how much his appearance has been marred.

His fingers shake as they tug at the edge of the bandage. Don't, part of him warns. But he has to. He has to see it. Slowly, he pulls the bandage away from his face.

The bandage drops to the floor, forgotten. His muscles tense and his jaw slightly agape, Jason grips the edge of the bathroom counter and pulls himself closer to stare into the mirror hanging on the wall.

It's no longer an open wound, though it's clearly not fully healed yet. The ruined skin is bright pink and red at the edges, outlining the curves of the letter as it curls over Jason's skin.

J. He can't tear his eyes away from it. Revulsion courses through him and Jason has to consciously focus on not throwing up as he

stares.

This cannot be undone.

He will always carry this. This symbol " this _mark _" of what had happened to him. It's a statement. Of who truly owns him.

Just makes sure people know he's yours.

He is Joker's property.

Jason retches, and he wrenches himself forward to heave up bile onto the bathroom tiles. Gagging, Jason reaches out blindly for the counter to steady himself. Once his stomach empties itself onto the floor, Jason begins looking about in a panic. He sees a washcloth and snatches it up, rubbing it vigorously against the brand.

He feels dirty. He feels utterly filthy, and all he can think of as he drags the washcloth against his skin is that he needs to wipe the filth away. Pain spikes in his face as Jason frantically scrubs at his skin, but he doesn't care. His breath is coming in short wheezes, and he hardly even notices the blood beginning to soak the cloth. Jason drops the cloth and blood seeps out of his now open wound freely, dripping down his jaw and throat.

He spins around in his wheelchair, searching desperately. Lunging for the medicine cabinet, he wrenches it open and shoves aside toothpaste, medicine, and other hygiene products until his hands close around a shaving razor.

Pulling the razor out, Jason smashes it against the countertop. He needs a blade from the razor. He needs it now, so he can cut out Joker's mark. If he cuts it out, he'll free himself from the dirtiness he feels in his body. In his very _soul._ He's sure of it.

He raises the razor to smash it once more. He cannot think clearly; the only tangible thought running through his mind is that he'd rather have a mangled, disfigured face than be forced to wear Joker's mark.

His fingers slide on the razor; the blades slice through his skin and blood begins to dribble down his fingers, making his grip slippery. He's gasping, choking on strangled gulps of air. _A blade. I need a blade. I need a blade. I need a blade_

"Jason!"

Jason's head snaps to the doorway. Bruce stands there, staring at Jason with wide eyes. Jason opens his mouth weakly, but no sound comes out. He looks back down at the razor and lifts it once more.

"Don't!" Bruce shouts. He lunges forward and tears the razor from Jason's hands. Jason snarls in rage and tries to snatch it back, but Bruce throws it through the bathroom doorway and into Jason's bedroom.

"Give it back, Bruce!" screams Jason. "Give it to me! I _need _it!"

"Jason, stop!" Bruce kneels down to Jason's level and grabs Jason by the shoulders. Jason smacks his hands away and tries to turn his wheelchair, but Bruce holds it in place.

"I _need _it!" sobs Jason. He tries to throw himself from the wheelchair, intending to crawl towards the razor if need be, but Bruce holds him down. "I need to cut it out! Let me! _Let me!"_

"No, Jason!" Bruce tightens his hold on Jason. "Jason!" Bracing the wheelchair against the bathtub with his legs, Bruce lays his hand on either side of Jason's head "avoiding the wound" and forcibly turns Jason to face him. "Jason, look at me!"

Tears blurring his eyesight, Jason tries to shake his head in Bruce's grasp. Sobs wrack his body as he looks into Bruce's face, his expression desperate "pleading_.

"Bruce, please," Jason chokes out. "_Please_. I need toâ€¦I need toâ€¦_I need to_â€¦" He's rambling now, and his sobbing elevates until his words die away and all he can do is cry.

Bruce gently pulls Jason out of his wheelchair and lowers both of them to the bathroom floor. He clutches Jason to him, murmuring reassurances into his son's hair.

"It's alright, Jason. It's okay." His grip tightens on the shuddering boy. "It's okayâ€¦_it's okay_." He repeats the words over and over, but he feels as though they're falling on deaf ears. Jason clings to Bruce, his blood and tears staining Bruce's shirt.

"I'm so sorry," Bruce whispers. "I'm so sorry, Jason."

Jason cannot speak. He cannot move. Only when a horrified Tim finds them there on the floor is Alfred brought up, and though it takes some time and a lot of cajoling, they're eventually able to pry Jason from Bruce and get him into his bed.

Bruce and Alfred stay by Jason's side until he finally falls asleep an hour later.

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Jason wakes to a dull throbbing in his left cheek. The lights have been turned off, but his room is still faintly lit from the TV screen on the far wall. The volume is too low for Jason to hear it, but Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck are currently arguing about something onscreen.

Looking away, Jason is surprised to see that he not alone in his room. Not by a long shot. A futon had been dragged into the room and set up; sprawled out on it are the sleeping forms of Dick and Tim. Pulled up to the bedside in his usual chair is Bruce, also asleep.

For a long moment, Jason is confused as to what had happened and why it would constitute everyone deciding to have a fucking sleepover in his room. His heart sinks as the memory of the incident in the bathroom comes back to him. Shame coiling in his chest, he moans and wearily rubs his forehead.

Bruce stirs beside him, and before Jason can fall back against his pillows and feign sleep, Bruce's eyes open and fall upon Jason.

"Jason," he mumbles sleepily. Stretching his arms, he straightens in his chair. He gazes at Jason, studying him in that intruding way Jason hates. "How are you feeling?"

"Fucking fantastic," mutters Jason. He pulls his left leg up and wraps his arms around it, resting his chin on top. He sighs, his voice quiet and small as he talks. "Bruce, I'm so sorry. I really fucked up this time. I didn't meanâ€¦" The words die on his lips. What didn't he mean? He didn't mean it when he had tried to cut out part of his face? He groans again, rubbing his fists against his closed eyes.

"Jason," Bruce says softly. "You have nothing to apologize for." He pauses, staring down at his hands. When he speaks again his voice is hushed, but heavy with sincerity. "You understandâ€¦you know thatâ€¦if I could, I would gladly take everything that had happened to you and place it upon myself. Not a day goes by that I don't wish I could've taken your place all those months ago." Jason is shocked by the emotion that clings to Bruce's next words. "I'm so sorry, Jason."

Swallowing hard, Jason feels the new bandage on his cheek pull at his skin as his face takes on a strained expression.

"I'm so tired." He is. He's tired of dealing with this day every. He's tired of being a nuisance, a burden to this household â€" and to Bruce. He's not sure how much longer he can keep up with this exhaustion.

Bruce leans forward carefully, reaching out. When Jason doesn't recoil, Bruce places a hand on Jason's head and draws him close. Gently, he presses his lips to the top of his son's head. "You'll be alright, Jason. I promise."

Jason nods, blinking back tears. Bruce releases Jason and he settles back against the pillows, feeling drained.

"Will you stay?" Jason whispers. He feels like such a child asking, but the words are spoken before he can stop them.

"Always."

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****Whew. Two updates in like what, 12-ish hours? My inspiration for this story is crazy - I haven't been able to stop writing! However, I do have a research paper that I have been neglecting that desperately needs attention. So I might not update as quickly from now on. Or I might, and just have zero hours of sleep haha. Just a bit of a warning. ****

13. Chapter 13

When Jason wakes the following morning, Dick, Tim, and the futon they had been sleeping on are gone. He wonders if maybe he had just imagined them being there. Blinking tiredly, Jason rolls over to see Bruce still sitting in his chair. He's awake though, and holding a picture frame in his hands.

Hearing the rustling of Jason's bedsheets, Bruce lifts his eyes from the picture. "Morning, Jason." He smiles. It's an odd smile. It's not warm and fluffy like Dick's would be, but it's not exactly sad either. Nevertheless, seeing the all-too-rare expression on Bruce's face brings some comfort to Jason.

"Hi," Jason mumbles, pushing himself into a sitting position.

Bruce leans over and sets the picture back down on Jason's nightstand. It's a picture of the two of them standing in the Gotham High baseball field, both wearing Gotham High baseball caps. Jason is sporting a lopsided grin, holding up a baseball in one hand and resting a bat against his shoulder with the other. Bruce is flashing a smile of his own, and has his arm around Jason's shoulders.

Jason studies the picture silently. He had only been living at the Manor for six months when that picture had been taken. They had been the best six months of his entire life. Now, as he reminisces, all he can feel is an aching sadness in his chest.

"Jason." Jason's gaze snaps back to Bruce, who is watching him with a solemn expression. "I want to apologize. What happened last night was my fault."

Jason frowns at Bruce in confusion, his eyebrows drawing together.

"I should not have let you work on the mission with Barbara," continues Bruce. "It was brash of me to shove you into that situation before you were ready. So from now on â€"

"You know, for being the 'World's Greatest Detective,' sometimes you can be really dense," cuts in Jason. Bruce blinks in surprise. Jason shoots Bruce an exasperated â€" and exhausted â€" look. "Bruce, the mission had nothing to do with what happened last night. Sure that douchebag said some shit, but that's not what made me want to hack off half my face with a shaving razor."

Bruce grimaces.

Jason fidgets with his wrist's cast, sighing deeply. "I was going to have to look at the damn thing eventually. What happened was probably going to happen anyway, regardless of whatever else might have occurred in the few hours leading up to it." He gives the mattress a small pound with his fist, and his voice grows small. "I guess I'm just not as strong as I hoped I was."

"No," says Bruce fervently. "Jason don't say that. Your strength is something that never fails to amaze me. I couldn't be more proud of the progress you've made."

Jason stares at him.

"However," Bruce says. He presses his hands together. "I still am unsure about allowing you to continue working on missions. At least until you're ready," he adds hurriedly, upon seeing Jason's face.

Desperation clings to Jason's words. "Bruce, no. You have to let me continue working on missions. I need this. I can handle it â€" I swear it."

Unconvinced, Bruce's eyes hold a pained expression in them as he begins to shake his head. "Jason â€"

"Please, Bruce," Jason begs. "Don't take this away from me."

They hold each other's gaze for a long while. Finally, Bruce sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "Alright."

A weak, relieved smile slips onto Jason's face.

Bruce holds up a hand in warning. "However, if I feel that they become too demanding of you, I will take you off of them."

Jason's expression falls at that.

Bruce sighs and reaches out, laying a hand on Jason's leg. "It's not a punishment," he says. "It's a precaution. I don't want you taking unnecessary risks until you're fully healed."

His lips pressed together tightly, Jason nods.

"Good." Bruce stands. "Do youâ€|do you think you'll be up for coming down to breakfast? Dick and Tim wanted to wait for you, but if you'd ratherâ€|"

Jason hesitates, uncertain. He's not sure he wants to face either Dick or Tim after what he had almost done last night. They must think he's so pathetic. He rubs his hands against the top of the bedsheets. "No," he finally says. "Go ahead. I think I'll justâ€|" He bites his lip.

Bruce glances at the door. Then he turns back to face Jason. "Would you like Alfred to bring you and I breakfast here? Or would you rather be alone?"

Keeping his eyes on the bedsheets twisting between his fingers, Jason shrugs. "I meanâ€|if you want toâ€|you can stay."

So he does. They sit in front of the television as they eat, watching a made-for-TV movie version of Huckleberry Finn (it was the only thing on that Jason didn't skip past after two seconds of watching) in silence. It's not exactly tense silence â€" if anything, Jason finds himself feeling strangely comforted by it, as though the simple presence of Bruce is enough to reassure him.

When Alfred comes to collect their trays, Bruce stands. "I'm going down to the Batcave to work on the lead we got last night," he tells Jason. "If you need me, I'll be down there."

Jason pokes at the joystick on his wheelchair's armrest. "Okay," he answers.

Bruce nods. "Oh, by the way," he says. "Dr. Leslie called me this morning. She says she's going to come by in four days to look at your fingers. If she's satisfied with their progress she's going to take off the splints."

Jason's eyes light up in relief. "Really?"

"Yes, soâ€¦try not to strain them, alright?"

Jason cringes a bit at that. "Yeah," he says, a bit more deflated. "Okay."

"Good." Bruce says, walking towards the bedroom door. "You know where I'll be, if you need anything."

As Bruce leaves the room, Jason turns his hands over and studies the splints encasing them. Despite Bruce's warning, exhilaration starts to build back up inside him. Finally, he was going to be able to do things with a bit more ease. Grinning to himself, Jason leaves his bedroom to head to the Manor's library.

"Whoa!"

Starting in response to the sudden shout, Jason jerks his wheelchair to stop; Dick stumbles backwards a few steps, having nearly run right into Jason.

Jason glares up at Dick in exasperation. "Way to watch where you're going, Dick."

"Was that an insult, or were you calling me by my name?" Dick asks, grinning down at Jason.

Jason frowns. "Do you need something, or can I go?"

Taken aback by the hostility in Jason's tone, Dick's expression falls slightly. His movements awkward, Dick reaches up and rubs the back of his neck. "I justâ€¦I wanted to see how you were doing. You know, sinceâ€¦"

Jason shrinks into himself a little, uncomfortable warmth creeping up his neck as he clenches his wheelchair's armrests. How he wishes Dick and Tim had not been here for that. "I'm fine," he says tightly.

Dick's eyes fall upon Jason's bandage. Immediately jerking his head so that his left cheek is facing away from Dick, Jason makes a sound of annoyance. "Can I pass, please?"

"Jason â€œ"

Jason starts to shove his wheelchair forward and Dick is forced to move to the side.

"Jason, it's okay to â€œ"

"No," snaps Jason, twisting back around. "It's not okay, Dick. It will never be okay." Dick bites his lip. Jason has half a mind to keep going down the hall, but something makes the words continue to spill from his mouth. "All I do day after day is wheel around this damn manor, completely useless and unable to do even the simplest tasks for myself. I can't even look at my own reflection without having some kind of mental breakdown. I feel pathetic, and I feel weak. You â€" the perfect first son of Bruce Wayne â€" you have no idea what that could possibly feel like."

Dick's mouth droops open slightly as he tries to find the words to say. "Jasonâ€" he swallows. "You're right. I have no idea what it must be like for you. And I'm sorry. But â€" If it's possible, his eyes seem to increase in their earnestness. "I want to help you, Jason."

Jason sneers, trying to ignore the aching in his chest. "I don't need your help."

"Then let me just be here for you," Dick says. "Please. Don't push me or Tim away. No matter what has or will happen, we would never think any less of you."

"Any less than I am now?" Jason says, his voice biting. He's not exactly sure why he's so mad at Dick. Truthfully, he's not convinced his anger is directed at Dick at all â€" but rather himself. And his own weaknesses and fears he just can't seem to shed.

Dick lifts a hand towards Jason in an imploring manner. "Jason," he says. "You are a thousand times more strong than I could ever hope to be. Don't disservice yourself by losing faith in who you are." Reaching out, Dick grasps Jason's hands in his own. "Despite what you may think, Joker has not destroyed you. You are still Jason Todd â€" my brother."

Emotion swells in Jason, and for the tiniest instant he squeezes Dick's hands in response. Then he hurriedly pulls them away and instead grasps the wheelchair's joystick. "Iâ€" I need to go," he mutters.

Dick straightens, but doesn't move. "If you want," he says. "Tim and I were going to re-paint the garden gate in the backyard. We'd like the company." He flashes a teasing grin. "We won't make you paint â€" promise."

Jason taps his hand against the wheelchair's joystick. He sighs. "Alright."

Set up outside with buckets of white paint and cold lemonade provided by Alfred, the three boys place themselves along the gate that runs along the edge of the garden. Dick and Tim crouch on the balls of their feet, sweating beneath the summer sun as they work. Jason watches them for about ten seconds before he too snatches up a paintbrush and moves so that he is off to the side, carefully painting the top of the gate.

Dick pulls out his phone and brings up a radio station. Once the music is blaring at an appropriate volume, Dick settles his phone in the arms of a nearby garden gnome. The music does wonders â€" any lingering tension between the three boys fades as the varying songs

play. Though they do not carry on in a long, ongoing conversation, every once in a while a teasing quip or cleverly placed joke is said. And so they work long into the morning.

By lunchtime Jason's arm is almost too heavy for him to hold up any longer, due to his still-healing injuries and the lack of exercise his body has had because of them. Exhaustion pulsates through the limb, and when Alfred brings out sandwiches for everyone, the paintbrush all but falls from Jason's limp fingers. If Dick and Tim notice, they do not say anything. They eat with a relaxed air, listening to music and watching the tangled mass of clouds drift sleepily across the sky.

The garden gate is not long, and so it doesn't take much time after lunch to finish. Once they've cleaned up, Dick tells the two that he needs to return to Blüdhaven for the next few days, though he promises to be back when Dr. Leslie visits to remove Jason's finger splints.

As he and Tim watch Dick drive off on his motorcycle, Jason is surprised to feel a twinge of remorse spring up in him. Dick waves as he passes through the Manor's driveway gate, and then he's gone.

For the next four days Tim and Jason fall back into their old routine. Together they work on the Donaghue case, and on his own time Jason continues his helmet project. At night, when Bruce and Tim go on patrol, Jason stays in the cave, helping as needed. But nothing major comes up during the four days, and so he doesn't have much to do before Alfred forces him to go to bed. Every night Jason tries to convince Alfred to let him stay longer, but Alfred's insistence that he needs to rest to heal wins every time, and Jason is all but dragged out of the Batcave.

Nevertheless, the four days pass quickly enough, and soon Dr. Leslie and Dick both arrive to see how Jason's hands are doing. Stuck in a Wayne Enterprises meeting with Lucius Fox, Bruce is unable to be there. However, Dick and Tim linger in Jason's room, trying not to look intrusive as Dr. Leslie sits beside Jason's wheelchair, examining him.

Dr. Leslie removes the splints from Jason's fingers with care, checking over each one with a critical eye before moving onto the next. The minutes seem to pass with agonizing slowness, but Dick is surprised by how patiently Jason sits there. Finally, the last splint is removed.

"Your left pinky and left ring finger healed extremely well," Dr. Leslie comments as she gathers the splints to discard them. "Their splints could have been removed a few days prior to now, but no matter. Now," she says, giving Jason a stern "though not hostile" look. "Jason, I am serious when I say this" do _not _over-exert yourself. Even though the splints are off, you cannot do strenuous exercise with your hands for at least two weeks. Your fingers still need time to fully heal, even without the splints holding them in place. Do not do anything that would make me have to re-splint them. Do you understand?"

Jason nods. "Yes."

Dr. Leslie gives him a satisfied smile. "Good. Now, your fingers are

still very weak. You'll have to do daily exercises with them in order to strengthen them."

Dr. Leslie explains to Jason the necessary exercises and helps him practice through them. His fingers are stiff though, and tremble slightly as he does as Dr. Leslie instructs. But she seems satisfied, and after giving him a reassuring pat leaves Jason alone with Dick and Tim.

"This is great, Jason," Dick says as he and Tim stand and walk to Jason's side. "They look like they healed really well."

Jason nods, staring down at his hands. He flexes them, reveling in the sensation. He can't remember the last time he was able to do such a simple motion without burning pain shooting through the abused fingers. He gives a small, breathy laugh, and feels tears prick his eyes. Then a pair of hands reach out and gently grasp his. Looking up, Jason sees Dick crouch down in front of him.

A shaky smile spreads across Jason's face. Dick returns the expression and leans forward until his forehead presses against Jason's. Dick doesn't say anything, and neither does Jason. But, for the first time in maybe his entire life, Jason is truly glad that Dick is there with him.

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****Added note:** You know, even if the gardens are out near the greenhouse, a gnome at Wayne Manor seems ridiculous to me now. But I like to think of it as Tim putting it there, just to "brighten" the place up. And to bug Bruce. Bruce hardly ever goes out back, but he has seen the (small) gnome and hates it with a passion.**

14. Chapter 14

Over the next few weeks Jason seeks out any tasks he can do to keep himself busy. He completes his helmet design, and the materials he orders arrive quickly, allowing him to begin constructing it. Tim offers to help him if needed, but for the most part Jason works alone, putting great care into the project.

When he isn't building the helmet, Jason and Tim continue their investigation into the Donaghue case. Their leads are followed up by Batman and Robin at night, and within the next week the two murderers of James and Annie Donaghue are apprehended by Gotham's Dark Knight and the Boy Wonder.

Whereas nights are always busy, it's the hours during the day that are the worst for Jason. Tim is often at school, and with Bruce working on one thing or another, it's usually just Jason occupying himself. The loneliness that invades him proves to be overwhelming at times. Of course he would never tell anyone that, but nevertheless, he can't help but feel a surge of relief when Tim returns to the Manor in the afternoons.

And so the weeks pass.

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It's early in the morning, so Wayne Manor is naturally quiet. Jason is in the Batcave alone, putting the finishing touches on his helmet. He's rather proud of it, but he wishes he could heal faster so he could actually use it. Dr. Leslie had come by the other day and had told him that she would take off his wrist's cast this coming Thursday. The bruising on his body has pretty much all disappeared by now, and his ribs are nearly fully healed. He is finally making significant progress, and he has never felt more relieved.

The sound of the elevator doors opening attracts his attention, and he looks up to see Barbara wheeling out into the Batcave.

"Hey, Barbara," he says. "When'd you get here?"

"About five minutes ago," replies Barbara, stopping by his side. "I thought I'd come by and see how you're doing."

Jason adjusts a screw on the bottom of the helmet. "I'm fine."

Barbara turns her attention from Jason to the completed helmet in his hands. "It's impressive."

Jason just shrugs, though he looks pleased.

A small smile slips onto Barbara's face as a memory sparks in her mind. "It sort of reminds me of the fairy tales my dad used to read to me when I was little."

Glancing up, Jason flashes her a confused look. "Huh?"

An embarrassed flush creeps onto Barbara's cheeks. "You know, all those stories where the prince saves the damsel in distress? Your helmet â€" it makes me think of the armor that the heroes would wear into battle."

Jason is silent, mulling her words over.

"It's funny," Barbara continues. "When I first started out as Batgirl, I thought about those stories a lot. I used to think of us as Gotham's knights in shining armor. This was our kingdom, and we had to protect it." She gives a short laugh. "That sounds pretty dumb when I say it out loud."

"No it doesn't." Jason sets the helmet on the worktable, his gaze thoughtful. "You know, when I lived with my parents, we couldn't afford things like books. It was a struggle to even get a proper dinner on the table every night. But that's what we were used to." He stops for a second, surprised at how easily he's speaking about this. But somehow that always seems to happen when he's with Barbara. "Then one month this billionaire named Bruce Wayne held a charity event in my neighborhood. You could go there and fill up a Wayne Enterprises backpack with anything that would fit into it. There was food, clothing, hygiene products. I asked if I could go, but my dad said no, saying that we didn't need it. I snuck out anyway."

"When I got there, the place the event was being held in was packed. People were pushing and shoving to get to the different tables. I put the usual stuff in my backpack â€" food, soap, this pair of shoes I really wanted. Then I saw a small table with a bunch of books. Not as many people were around that one, but I was drawn to it anyway. I was able to read a little at the time, but not extremely well. And yet, I was fascinated as I shuffled through the various books. I knew I should've saved room in the backpack for more important things, but I couldn't help myself. I picked out a children's edition of Oliver Twist and a copy of Grimm's Fairy Tales."

"When I got back home, I immediately hid the books. I then tried to give the rest of the stuff to my mom, but my dad caught me andâ€¦" Jason pauses. "Well, he got rid of the stuff. Despite that, I still managed to keep the books secret from him. It took a while, but I eventually read my way through both of them." Jason taps his fingers against his helmet. "I had always pictured myself in the hero's role in those fairy tales." He laughs softly. "So I guess it fits, me making this helmet."

Tears in her eyes, Barbara grasps Jason's hand. Jason squeezes her palm in response, but doesn't say anything else. Only when Tim comes down with a box of donuts for breakfast do the two separate. For the rest of the day, Jason interacts like normal with Tim and Barbara. However, when Barbara says her goodbyes later that evening, Jason's hug is noticeable fiercer this time. Barbara returns the ferventness of the gesture and smiles, promising to come back soon.

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It's 4:01am. Having just come back from patrol, Bruce sends Tim to bed and heads to the Manor's library to grab some case notes he had left there the other day.

Even with the door to the library shut, Bruce only turns on the desk lamp to light the room; the orange glow proves to be just enough for him to see by. Pushing aside stacks of papers and books left by Jason, Bruce searches slowly, trying to ignore his body's insistence that he sleep.

The door to the library creaks open. Bruce glances up and is surprised to see Jason there, who looks equally flustered.

"Oh," Jason says. The exhaustion in his voice is borderline worrying. "Sorry, Bruce. I didn't thinkâ€¦"

"It's alright," says Bruce. "I'm just looking for some notes I had left here the other day."

"Top left drawer."

Bruce pauses, then gives a curt nod. "Thanks." He pulls open the drawer and â€" sure enough â€" there they are. Pulling the papers out, Bruce looks back up at Jason with concern. It's not only weariness that clings to Jason's voice. "Jason? You alright?"

Jason shifts, looking uncomfortable. "Yeahâ€¦" He answers in a tone that says otherwise. "Just a dream. It's normal though. That's why I was coming here â€" couldn't sleep."

Bruce sets the notes down. His hands spread out over the papers as he tries to figure out the best way to ask. "I wasn't very tired myself," he lies. "Do youâ€¦want to watch something downstairs?"

A small shake of the head. "No. I justâ€¦" Jason looks away, rubbing his left arm.

Bruce glances back down at the notes. "Well, I was going to just read over these case notes," he says. "If you want, you can sit with me while I do so."

Jason takes a long moment, considering. "Okay," he says, in an almost shy way that sounds nothing like Jason Todd. Bruce grimaces; he wonders how bad the nightmare had been. Jason runs his fingers over his wheelchair's armrests. "Were you just gonna stay here?"

"Actually," answers Bruce. "I was thinking of maybe going to the parlor. It's a bit chilly tonight, and I was going to start up a fire."

Jason shrugs. "K."

So they go to the parlor. Bruce has a fire going in the hearth shortly, and he helps Jason move from his wheelchair to the couch facing the fireplace. Sitting down beside him, Bruce is careful to leave some space between them, as he's not sure Jason wants him touching him. Bruce begins reading through his notes and Jason simply stares into the fire, watching with a distant solemnness. The only sounds in the room are of the crackling flames and the occasional rustling of Bruce's papers, but it's enough for both of them, who relax into the warm quietness.

Three hours later, Alfred enters the parlor. He stops, staring at the sight before him.

Bruce is fast asleep, sinking back into the couch's cushions with his head falling forward. Some papers are draped over his legs, though a few have fallen to the floor at his feet. Slumped up against Bruce's side is Jason, also asleep. His mouth is open slightly, and Alfred can hear soft snores coming from the boy. Bruce's arm is slung around Jason's shoulders, holding him close in their slumber.

Smiling, Alfred quietly leaves the room.

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As promised, Dr. Leslie comes on Thursday to take off Jason's wrist cast. When it's finally removed, the relief swelling in Jason prompts a wide smile to spread across his face. His wrist is extremely weak, and it looks smaller than his right one due to the loss of muscle mass, but at this point he doesn't care in the least. He follows Dr. Leslie's exercises exactly, doing them more times a day that necessary. He's determined to reach the strength he had as Robin as soon as possible, and the more he heals, the more fervent his ambition becomes. Bruce has to finally step in to stop Jason from overexerting himself, but Jason isn't deterred in the least.

Though Jason pleads with Dr. Leslie, she is firm in her decision to not allow him the use of crutches for two more weeks, so as to let

his wrist fully heal before pressure is put on it. The two weeks pass slowly for Jason, despite Barbara and Dick's attempts to come over as much as possible to keep him company when Tim isn't there. But finally the time limit is up, and Bruce provides an ecstatic Jason with crutches.

Having not walked on his own for such a long time, Jason is a bit wobbly for the first few hours. However, he's been keeping up with exercises for his left leg so it wouldn't lose strength, and soon he's moving along just fine. Exhilaration pumps through him as he moves, finally feeling _free _for the first time since he'd been brought back to the manor.

Dick comes over again Sunday night, and he, Jason, and Tim are soon sprawled out in the living room, surrounded by piles of junk food and an array of pillows and blankets they had collected. Sitting sideways in an armchair so that his legs dangle over the armrests, Dick flips through the TV channels with a bored air, trying to find something for them all to watch.

"I wonder if we could cut it off with one of Bruce's Batarangs," Jason comments, lifting his cast-encased leg up a bit from the ottoman placed in front of the couch he and Tim are sitting on.

Tim stuffs a handful of popcorn into his mouth. "We could try."

"Or we could draw Green Lantern and Flash's symbols all over it." Jason leans over Tim, reaching for the pack of Twizzlers lying on a nearby pillow. "I bet that would tick Bruce off."

"We should have Superman sign it," Tim says. "He'd be more than happy to."

"How do we contact Superman?" muses Jason. "I mean, I know Bruce can whenever he wants to, but how do _we?" _Jason looks over at Dick. "Dick?"

Dick shrugs. "I don't know." He thinks for a second, then grins. "We could ask Lois to be in on it. We'll wear some masks and pretend we're kidnapping her. Then when Superman swoops in to save the day, we'll have him sign your cast. Presuming he hasn't punched in our faces by that point."

"Perfect," laughs Tim. "I bet Lois would so be in on that. She's awesome."

"You met her once, Tim," Dick says, catching a Twizzler Jason tosses to him.

"So? She was still cool."

Dick smirks teasingly at Tim, who retaliates by chucking a pillow at him.

Grinning, Jason tears off a large chunk of Twizzler with his teeth as Dick continues to channel surf. Dick turns to a news channel, and lets it play for his designated three seconds before preparing to flip to a different one.

"â€" just received reports telling us that â€"â€"

Dick begins to press down on the channel button.

"â€" a terrorist bomb had gone off inside downtown's Gotham Park Mall."

All three boys freeze, their attentions completely locked onto the screen.

The reporter shakes her head in dismay. "Twelve people were killed in the bombing, and thirty-five people were injured. We have some of our staff out there right now â€"

"What's going on?"

The boys twist around to see Bruce standing at the entrance to the hallway.

Dick gestures to the TV. "Something happened at Gotham Park Mall."

Frowning, Bruce walks over to stand beside the couch, his eyes focused on the TV.

"â€" reports that the person responsible for the bombing is none other than the infamous Joker himself."

Tension seizes hold of the room. Feeling as though he's been dunked in a pool of ice, Jason shifts uncomfortably, well aware that all eyes are on him now. His movements stiff, Jason forces himself to glance at Bruce.

Bruce watches Jason cautiously. "Jasonâ€|"

Jason shakes his head. "Justâ€|keep it on," he mutters tightly.

"Jason â€"

"It's fine, Bruce," Jason grinds out. "It's...we need to hear this. Don't worry â€" I can handle it."

Unconvinced, Bruce reluctantly returns his attention to the TV.

The news channel is now showing live footage from on-the-scene reporters, who are trying to get as close to the rubble as possible. The bomb had taken out two stores on the bottom level of the eastern side of the mall, and the damage the news cameras are showcasing is devastating. Graffiti covers what is left of the walls. It's obvious that it's all Joker's work. Most of the graffiti is of deranged smiles or the words "ha, ha, ha" repeated over and over. Then the camera zooms in on one on the far wall.

It's crudely painted, but it's not hard to tell that it's a robin bird. Sprayed over the robin is a jagged J; beneath it in bright red are eight words:

Lost property â€" return to Joker at earliest convenience.

The red of the letters is glaring; all Jason can see is blood.

15. Chapter 15

Dick hurriedly shuts off the TV, but the words have already burned themselves into Jason's mind.

Lost property.

His hand flies to the bandage he refuses to remove from his cheek. Property. That's what he is. And now Joker is coming to reclaim him.

His chest tightens, and Jason realizes that he has stopped breathing. He sucks in a shuddering breath, staring at the black television screen.

"Jason? _Jason?_"

Jason shakes his head, trying to pinpoint the voice. He looks about him, confused, until he realizes that Bruce is standing in front of him. He jerks back against the couch cushions, staring at Bruce with wide eyes.

Bruce holds his hands out, trying to look as non-threatening as possible. "Jason, can you hear me? _Say something._"

Jason blinks hard, trying to focus. "Iâ€|Iâ€|" he grips the edge of the couch, steadying himself. "Yeah," he gasps. "I'm fine. Iâ€|" He squeezes his eyes shut. "_Fuck_."

"Jason, it's alright," Bruce says. "You're safe â€" I promise. He can't find you here."

Jason shakes his head. No, that's not right. Somehow, he knows that's not true. Something's wrong, more so than just seeing Joker's "message" on the news.

The room suddenly feels cold. Too cold. He blinks hard, but when he opens his eyes all he can see is the bloody floor of the room Joker had kept him in for nine months. Sucking in short breathes, he shakes his head again, trying to rid himself of the vision. But the sight stays, and then he hears the sound of a bone being snapped.

He hears a scream. His own.

Come on, Boy Blunder. Tell me. What's your name?

More screaming.

We've been at this for six hours. Don't you want to rest?

Sobbing. The sound of another bone being broken.

Bats won't be mad! I promise.

_Jasonâ€|_comes his voice. Betraying him.

A hand presses down on Jason's ankle, the crunching lost in Jason's agonized cries. _And your last?_

Todd. It comes out more as a sob than a word, but it's still understandable. _Toddâ€|_

What an obedient boy you are! Harley, isn't he a good boy? Bats would be so proud â€" if he cared, that is.

Horror dawns on Jason as the memory comes back to him. How had he forgotten that? How could he have possibly not remembered that he had told Joker his _name? _Jason knew that sometimes people suffering from traumatic experiences would block out certain parts, butâ€|that seemed too important to not rememberâ€|

He hears more voices, though these ones seem rather distant. Squeezing his eyes shut, Jason tries to concentrate. Where is he? _Where is he?_

"Jason? _Jason!"_

_ Bruce. _It's Bruce's voice. Jason's eyes snap open, and he sees the rug of the Manor's living room. Gasping with relief, he looks up and locks eyes with Bruce.

"Jason, I _promise_. You're safe," Bruce edges closer. "Stay with us now."

Jason gives his head an erratic shake. "Iâ€|I need toâ€|Iâ€|"

Bruce beckons with his hand. "Here, come on â€"

Jason just continues to shake his head. "No. You don't understandâ€|heâ€|" He stands suddenly, clutching the couch's end table for support and looking about him wildly. "Iâ€|oh Godâ€|Bruceâ€|"

Bruce edges forward. "It's alright, Jason."

"No. No, no, no, noâ€|" Jason's breathing starts to quicken.

"Jason, it's okay," insists Bruce. "He doesn't know where you are, he â€"

"_He knows my name!"_

Everyone goes still. Dick's eyes widen slightly, and Tim's grip on the edge of the couch tightens.

"What?" breathes Bruce.

Tears well in Jason's eyes. "He knows my name," he repeats weakly. "I didn't realizeâ€|I didn't remember I had told himâ€|" Jason wraps his arms around himself, looking like a terrified child as he backs away from Bruce. He only takes one step on his good foot before he stumbles and latches onto an empty armchair to hold himself upright. "I know I shouldn't haveâ€|I justâ€|he promised. He promised it would all just _stop_ if I just told himâ€|" The look on Jason's face â€" it is one of absolute devastation and shame. "I didn't want to, Bruce. I'm so sorry. He lied. I finally told himâ€|and he lied. It didn't stop. He liedâ€|he liedâ€|it kept goingâ€|" Jason doesn't seem to be aware of anyone else in the room anymore. His eyes grow distant

and hollow as he stares into the ground, his entire body trembling.

"Jasonâ€|?" Dick says tentatively.

Jason doesn't seem to hear Dick. He's gasping hard now, struggling to draw air. His hands clench, tightening on the armchair.

"Jason?" Bruce's voice is strained as he steps forward. Jason doesn't answer; his chest heaves as he starts to hyperventilate.

Tim glances anxiously at Bruce. "He's having a panic attack."

Tears begin to stream down Jason's cheeks as choked sobs are torn from him.

"Jason, listen to me," Bruce says, his voice firm â€" but not harsh. "Listen to my words â€" focus on them."

Jason shakes his head, rocking back and forth.

"Jason, listen to me," Bruce presses. "It's me. _It's Bruce._"

Jason's body is shivering violently, and it's all he can do to breathe as tears streak down his face.

"Count," Bruce says. "Jason, count with me. You need to _focus_." He pauses for a short moment, then begins. "Oneâ€|twoâ€|"

Jason keeps shaking his head.

"Threeâ€|fourâ€|"

Jason's struggles to get his jaw to move.

"Fiveâ€|"

"Sixâ€|" Jason manages to grind out. "Sevâ€|no, noâ€|noâ€|" His grip on the chair weakens and Bruce lunges forward, catching Jason and helping him ease to the floor. Jason hunches over, wrapping his arms around his legs and burying his head in them, his sobs muffled.

Bruce keeps his hand on Jason's back, steadying the boy as he rocks back and forth. "Jason â€" baseball. Think of baseball. Think of the feeling of the leather glove encasing your hand. That satisfying thud you hear when you perfectly catch a throw. The weight of the ball in your hand as you ready yourself to pitch it. Don't think of anything else. Just think of that baseball."

Jason's rocking begins to lesson, though he continues to shake his head into his arms.

"Don't think of anything else, Jason. Think of that baseball. _Your_ baseball. Come on, son."

Agonizing minutes pass, with Jason curled up against the armchair and Bruce hunched over him, whispering reassurances. Finally, Jason gives one last shudder and goes limp. Bruce pulls the boy to him, and Jason

just stares at the floor, his eyes wide and far away.

Bruce lifts his eyes to Dick and Tim, who are frozen, staring in horror. But upon catching Bruce's gaze, Dick seems to snap out of it. He taps Tim, and they quietly leave the room.

Nearly a quarter of an hour passes before Bruce stands, holding Jason against his chest. If he were more cognizant, Jason would have protested. But it's all Jason can do to keep his breathing regular as Bruce takes him upstairs and sets him in his bed.

Bruce pulls up his usual chair to the bed and places a gentle hand on Jason's arm. "Jason?"

Jason doesn't even look at Bruce. His expression haunted, he rolls over, turning his back to Bruce.

Bruce tries again. "Jason, do you want me to stay?"

No answer.

Bruce wearily rubs a hand across his face, but he doesn't move to leave the room. Minutes pass, with Jason staring out the window of his room and Bruce watching his son with a frustrated helplessness.

A half hour later, there's a soft knock at the door. Bruce twists around in the chair as the door opens a crack.

"Bruce?" Dick whispers.

Careful to make as little noise as possible, Bruce gets up and walks to the door. "What is it, Dick?"

Dick's eyes flicker to Jason's unmoving form. "I know this isn't a great time, but you need to come downstairs. There's been multiple sightings of him all over the south side of Gotham. A tattoo shop was set on fire twenty minutes ago, and it's also covered in his graffiti. You need to come, now."

Bruce nods grimly. He casts a final look in Jason's direction. "He's asleep now," Bruce says. "I'll have Alfred stay close by in case he wakes. Let's go."

Slipping out into the hallway, Bruce closes the door, encasing Jason in darkness.

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Despite Bruce's assumptions, Jason has not fallen asleep. The entire time Bruce sits there watching him, Jason stares out his bedroom window, the thoughts in his mind burning too fast to allow him any kind of rest.

He had told Joker his name.

It had taken nearly the entirety of the nine months for Joker to get the information from him, but it doesn't matter he still told him. Unbearable shame washes through Jason. How could he have done that? He has betrayed everyone. Horror seeps into Jason's misery as

thoughts of what the Joker might do with the information Jason had given him burn through his mind.

They're all in danger.

Bruce, Alfred, Dick, Tim—they're all in danger because of him. He had given Joker vital information, and now they are all at risk. Even if there are multiple Jason Todd's in Gotham, it wouldn't be hard for Joker to piece together which one had been Robin.

What have I done?

A few minutes after Bruce finally leaves, Jason shifts. Sitting up, Jason places his throbbing head in his hands. He cannot let the Joker come to Wayne Manor. That is of absolute certainty. Even though Bruce may have his security systems and alarms and whatever else he thinks makes this place so safe, it won't matter. Joker always finds a way. And when he does, anyone might get hurt. Jason will not let that happen — he will not risk Joker harming them.

It's him that the Joker wants. So he'll have to lure Joker somewhere else — somewhere where it's just him. Hopefully that will satisfy the psycho clown. But where?

Jason frowns, thinking. He tries to remember everything he had told Joker on the days when he just couldn't take it anymore and finally broke down, answering the questions. It's hard for him to focus — he's just so dizzy.

Then he remembers one particular day Harley had been there. He doesn't remember the specifics of what they had done to him, but it had involved a _lot_ of electricity. However, he does remember what he had told Joker. Somehow, Joker had managed to get him to talk about the Gotham High baseball field. He never mentioned Bruce's name, but he told Joker about how he and Bruce went there often, just the two of them.

Jason isn't sure why the hell he had talked about that, but he realizes he wasn't exactly in a coherent state of mind when the words had spilled from his mouth. Joker hadn't been particularly interested in the information. Though he did bring a bat the next day.

Jason moans, rubbing his hands against his closed eyes. Minutes pass, and the memory fades just enough for Jason to concentrate again. Gotham High baseball field — that's where he needs to go. He's sure of it.

Pushing aside the covers, he pulls himself out of bed, grabbing his crutches Bruce had brought up. He turns on a small reading lamp on his nightstand, which gives him just enough light to see by without alerting the attention of anyone who might be in the hallway. Wrenching open the nightstand's drawer, Jason grabs a wad of money and stuffs it into his pockets, along with his phone he had had charging on the floor. He hobbles over to his closet, trying to ignore the frantic beating of his heart.

Pulling out a red sweatshirt, Jason slips it on and tugs the hood over his head. He goes back over to his bed and eases himself to the floor until he's lying on his chest. Stretching his arm out into the blackness beneath the bed, he feels about until his hand closes

around a black folding knife that had been taped to the box spring.

Pushing himself back into a sitting position, Jason flips open the knife, studying the blade. He had brought it with him when he had first been brought to Wayne Manor. Alfred had told him to dispose of it immediately, and though Jason assured him he would, he instead hid it beneath his bed. Back then, he didn't fully trust Bruce and Alfred's claims that they had no intention of sending Jason back to where he had come from. And so he kept the knife he'd had since he was nine, just in case Bruce had finally had enough and decided to kick him out. He wasn't going back on the streets unarmed.

He hasn't touched the knifed since he had hidden it all those years ago. But now, it's the only thing that provides him with some bravery as he stuffs it into his pocket. If he wasn't on crutches, maybe he'd be able to steal some real equipment from the Batcave. But in the condition he's in now, he'd surely be noticed. And that's the last thing he wants.

Jason goes over to the window, but he doesn't open it yet. He knows the Manor's security is on high alert right now, and it'd be noticed immediately if he slid the window open. But he also knows how to disable it from his room; he had done it multiple times when he had been Robin, and he hopes the security system hasn't changed much since then.

Pulling a chair over to the window, Jason stands on it, using only his left foot to keep himself balanced, and stretches up until his face is staring at the pole the curtains are hung on. Pushing aside the curtains reveals a long, narrow metal plate screwed into the wall just above the window. Using a paper clip, Jason has the plate open in seconds.

Inside is a small wiring system for the window's alarm. To Jason's relief, it looks fairly similar to the one he had been so used to before. It takes less than a minute for him to disable it.

Carefully stepping back down to the floor, Jason leans on one crutch as he pulls the window open. A gust of cool air blows his hair back as he leans forward and gazes out onto the Manor grounds below. It looks clear. Jason grimaces, desperately wishing he had a grappling hook with him right now. He'll have to deal with the old fashioned type of escape rope.

Tying together the sheets and blankets from his bed, a makeshift rope is made in less than ten minutes. Jason secures it to one of his bed's legs and gives it a yank. It holds. Jason tosses the rope out of the window and lets it tumble through the air, where its end hovers three feet above the ground. He shrugs; he can work with that.

He grasps the rope, but hesitates, staring back into his room. Jason can't help himself as he moves back over to his nightstand, where he pulls out a piece of notebook paper and a pen.

His hand shakes as the pen hovers above the paper; his mind is blank â€" he can't think of what to say. Finally, he scrawls the only thing he can.

I'm sorry.

Jason stares at the two words. He sighs and tosses the pen back into the nightstand drawer before placing the note on one of the bed's pillows.

He hurries back over to the window and wraps a tight fist around the rope. Slinging his arm through his crutches, he pushes them up to his shoulder so they're as out of the way as possible. Then he sits on the wooden sill and twists around, lowering himself out the window. Using only his left foot, Jason slowly makes his way down the outside wall of the Manor, grateful that his room is only on the second floor.

He finally drops to the ground, wincing as his right leg is jostled. Picking himself up with his crutches, Jason heads towards the main driveway gates, careful to keep to the shadows. Emotions swell inside of him, and part of him begs to just go back inside and stay with Bruce forever. But he knows he can't. Not after what he's done. Not after he betrayed them.

This is for them.

He doesn't look back as he vanishes into the night.

16. Chapter 16

Jason uses his phone to call a taxi; as the car pulls up to the curb Jason promptly crushes the phone beneath one of his crutches, leaving the smashed remains there on the sidewalk. He tells the driver where to go and sits in silence, contemplating the passing scenery with a heavy thoughtfulness. Fear continues to nip at him, and he struggles to keep it under control. He feels as though he's going to the executioner's block â€" in a way, he supposes he is. Who knows what Joker will do this time?

Unlessâ€¦ Jason's hand closes around the knife in his pocket. Unless he manages to kill the Joker first.

He almost laughs out loud at that. Kill the Joker with nothing but a folding knife? Unlikely. But Jason's not going back without a fight, that's for sure.

The taxi pulls up to the outskirts of Gotham High's baseball field. Swallowing, Jason hands the driver his entire wad of cash and gets out. The taxi's engine roars to life and the driver speeds off, leaving Jason by the side of the road.

Jason takes a shuddering breath. _I'm so sorry, Bruce._ His body begins to tremble as he heads to the gate surrounding the field, making it difficult for him to move efficiently on his crutches. Picking the gate's padlock, Jason makes his way towards the short, stand-alone bleachers built on the far side of the field. The muddled sounds of Gotham's night life are distant to Jason's ears, whereas the soft thuds of his crutches pressing into the grass seem amplified, counting every step to his fate.

He climbs to the middle row of the bleachers and sits, leaving the crutches at his side. He shivers and pulls his hood further over his

head, leaning forward slightly. Every muscle in his body is tense as he waits, watches.

Minutes pass, and Jason begins to panic. Is there another place he had told Joker about? Was there something he missed? Or maybe Joker just doesn't care and is going to Wayne Manor anyway.

Come on, you sick son of a bitch. Come ON.

The baseball field's speakers crackle to life. Startled, Jason straightens and glances about him as a distorted version of "Take Me Out to The Ballgame" starts to play. The audio has been altered so that the voice and music are warped, sending chills up Jason's spine. His hands clench the bench he's sitting on and his breathing starts to quicken.

"If they don't win it's a shameâ€¦" the eerie song chants. "For it's one, two â€¦"

Then an all too familiar voice chimes in. "â€¦ three strikes you're out, at the old ball game!"

The music cuts out, and Jason's head snaps to where a slender figure casually walks towards him across the grass, tossing and catching a baseball. One of the field lights above Jason flickers on, illuminating the figure below him.

"I've been searching everywhere for you, junior!" the Joker exclaims gleefully. His pale features widen into an ecstatic grin. "My, my. Look at you! Fingers intact and everything! Your face still is the best part about you, as I've told you before â€¦ particularly the left side of it. Quite a work of art, I must say! Even though there seems to be something covering it up at the moment â€¦ now that's a shame."

Jason feels as though he's going to vomit. Chucking the baseball over his shoulder, Joker steps up onto the first bench of the bleachers. Despite himself, Jason jerks to his feet, stumbling backwards frantically. The back of his knees hit the bench behind him and he staggers, struggling to stay upright.

Joker looks more pleased than Jason's ever seen him. "You got my message, I presume? I was afraid it might have been too subtle. Harley came up with the idea of sending it from the mall, bless her. She's been worried _sick _about you, my dear boy! All those days in Arkham, just you, me, and her. We were quite the happy family!"

Jason tries to keep his breathing regulated, but it's difficult to do so. His own screams are echoing in his head, and he's having a hard time focusing.

"Then you had to go and spoil it all," the Joker gives a mocking frown. "But not to worry! Soon all will be right again, Jason."

Revulsion pulsates in Jason. To hear Joker say his name, to hear his torturer address him in such a personal way â€¦ it makes Jason feel sick.

Joker smiles, reveling in the boy's terror.

Jason grits his teeth, trying to replace his anxiety with anger. "What took you so long, then?" Jason asks, attempting to sound intimidating but failing miserably. "Got lost for a few months?"

Joker laughs. "Of course not, Bird Brain! I hadâ€|some _other _things to attend to that were more pressing then. But now that that's all finished, all I have time for is _you_."

Jason swallows, struggling to keep his composure.

His smile widening, Joker glances about him with an almost innocent air. "Boys?"

Jason's head snaps to his left and right and feels his heart drop to his stomach. Six men, three on the left and three on the right, emerge from the field's shadows, wearing clown paint on their faces. In seconds the small stack of bleachers is surrounded, and seven clown faces are grinning up at Jason.

"Shit," Jason mutters, trying to calm the pulsating fear within him. _Concentrate, Jason. Come on. Just like Bruce taught you._ He braces himself, but as he puts weight on his legs a spark of pain shoots up the right one. Right. He still has a cast on. He'll just have to make do. Squaring his shoulders, Jason watches as three of Joker's men start to ascend the bleachers. Three stay below on either side of Joker, waiting. Jason glances at the Joker â€" the one he needs to get to before any of these men take him. Joker only smiles back at him.

Jason purposefully shrinks in on himself as the men approach, making himself seem small and unwilling to fight. One of the men chuckles arrogantly and reaches out for Jason's arm. The moment the man is in reach Jason lunges forward, striking the thug on both sides of the head at the same time. With a moan, the man crumples to the bleachers. Joker claps, letting out a gleeful cry. The other two men rush forward, but Jason is ready.

Ducking a swing from the closer of the two men, Jason thrusts the heel of his palm into the thug's jaw. The man reels backward with a grunt, tripping over a bleacher and going down with a loud crash. However, in attacking the second man, Jason was unable to defend himself properly against the third. If he had his strength and agility from his time as Robin he could've avoided it easily. But in his current state, it's much more difficult. As the second man goes down, the third jumps forward, grabbing onto Jason's sweatshirt sleeve. He tugs hard, pulling Jason towards him. Wincing as pressure is put on his right foot, Jason spins around, whipping his arm towards the man's head. The man, expecting that, manages to catch Jason's punch mid-air. The two struggle against each other, but the bulkier man gives Jason a hard shove, and Jason tumbles down the bleacher steps.

Jason lands in the dirt at the bottom of the bleachers with a hard thud, sending dust flying everywhere. Groaning, Jason struggles to push himself upright. Lifting his head, he sees the recovered men coming down the bleacher steps. On the other side of him, Joker and the remaining three thugs approach. Panic shoots through Jason. He is

a sitting duck in his cast. Breathing hard, he tenses as the Joker kneels down in front of him.

"Now, now, Jason, let's be reasonable," Joker says. "I've tried to be courteous and all you've done is treat me and my boys with disrespect. It hurts."

Snarling, Jason thrusts his hand into his jeans pocket, grabbing his folding knife and flipping it open. His movements are quick " so quick that any normal thug would have gotten their throat slit. But Joker is just as fast; laughing, he lurches backwards from the swipe, and Jason's knife only manages to slice air.

Jason's arm hasn't even finished going through the motion of the slash when one of the thug's boots slams into his stomach. Jason's body is thrown back a few inches from the impact, and he curls up in the dirt, coughing violently. Before he can recover and try once again to attack Joker, another boot kicks him " this time directly into his recently healed ribs. Pain explodes in Jason, and the knife falls from his hands as he desperately tries to catch his breath.

Unable to move, Jason watches as Joker's gloved hand picks up the knife. "My goodness, what a temper you have."

A boot slams down on Jason's chest, turning him flat onto his back. The grinning thug keeps his boot on Jason, holding the boy in place as the Joker crouches over him.

"Does good ol' Bats know that you play with such dangerous weapons?" Joker twirls the knife between his fingers. "Is that why he abandoned you in the first place? Were you too violent of a Robin for him?"

"Go fuck yourself," spits Jason.

"Such language," tuts Joker. He leans forward, wagging a finger. "Looks like I've got my work cut out for me. You should see my new workshop, Jason " it'll absolutely _shock _you."

Even though his body is held down, Jason's hands are still free. That's good enough for him. With a low growl, Jason swings a fist up towards Joker's face. Joker jumps back, bursting into laughter. Two of Joker's men drop to their knees beside Jason's head, grasping the boy's arms. Twisting Jason's skin in their grips, they slam his arms into the ground, holding him secure.

"He's got no sense of humor, boys," Joker chuckles. His smile takes on a more sinister edge to it, and he pulls out the flower that had been placed in his lapel. "But don't worry, I've got just the thing to make him laugh."

Jason's eyes widen. "No!" he shouts, struggling against the men holding him down. The anger that had boiled up in him quickly turns to raw fear as Joker holds out the flower. There's a soft noise of pressurized air being release, and then a purple cloud of Joker Venon is sprayed directly into Jason's face.

"No!" Jason repeats. "No!" His face twitches. "Hee"ha"ha ha ha!" The giggles quickly turn to laughter, and Jason's body

convulses against the men holding him down as the laughs shake him.

Grinning madly, Joker nods at the men. The boot is taken off of Jason's chest, and the men holding onto his arms straighten, pulling the boy to his feet. Jason gasps, struggling to catch his breath in-between laughs. The group makes their way to the end of the baseball field, where a woman in pigtails waits in the driver's seat of a purple van. Unable to control his body, all Jason can do is laugh as he is dragged away.

Joker's laughter mixes in with Jason's, echoing into the night sky.

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Alfred knocks on Jason's bedroom door, carefully pushing it open as he speaks. "Master Jason? Are you awake? I know it's late, but Master Bruce wanted me to check on you before â€" " Alfred freezes, staring into the room.

The bed has been stripped bare; instead, a makeshift rope hangs out the still-open window of Jason's room. The closet door has been thrown open, and Alfred sees that Jason's favorite sweatshirt is missing. Then his gaze latches onto a piece of paper placed on one of the bed's pillows. Alfred rushes to the bed and snatches up the note, horror dawning on his face as he reads the words. Hurrying to the bookshelf surrounding Jason's headboard, he wrenches The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes backwards, opening Jason's elevator to the Batcave.

"Master Bruce!" Alfred exclaims as he enters the Batcave. "Master Bruce!"

Dressed in his Batman uniform, Bruce looks up from the computer screen. "Alfred, what's wrong?"

"It's Master Jason, sir," replies Alfred, holding out the note.

Frowning, Bruce takes the paper from the distraught butler and reads the short message. "No," he whispers, shooting to his feet. He lifts his eyes from the note. "His room?"

"Empty," Alfred says. "There's a rope made of bedsheets hanging out his window. I'm assuming he disabled the alarms."

"No, no, no," Bruce mutters frantically. "Damnit Jason. Damnit!" Crumpling the paper in his hands, Bruce rushes to the elevator along with Alfred, ascending into Jason's room.

All but running out of the elevator, Bruce immediately begins assessing the room. Looking out the window onto the grounds below, Bruce bites out a curse as he yanks the makeshift rope free and drops it to the bedroom floor.

"Where could he have gone, sir?" asks Alfred.

Bruce shakes his head. "Somewhere familiar. Somewhere he feels safe." He glances about him, and his gaze falls onto the picture of him and

Jason at the Gotham High baseball field. Eyes lighting up with hope, Bruce pulls his cowl down over his face. "Alfred, Dick and Tim are already attending to the scenes at the mall and the tattoo parlor. Contact them and tell them to leave it to the police â€" they need to meet me at the Gotham High baseball field, _now._"

"Yes, sir," Alfred says, struggling to keep his voice even. "And sir?"

Bruce pauses at the open elevator, glancing back at Alfred.

"Bring him home."

/

When Batman arrives at the field, Nightwing and Robin are already there. Unable to help himself, Batman runs towards them, desperation clinging to him.

"What did you find?" he demands.

Nightwing and Robin exchange uncomfortable glances.

"Your hunch was right," Robin says. He holds out a broken piece of plastic. Batman immediately recognizes it as part of Jason's crutches.

"There was also this," adds Nightwing. His expression grim, Nightwing unfolds Jason's crumpled red sweatshirt. "There'sâ€|something in the front pocket."

His muscles tense, Batman takes the sweatshirt from Nightwing. Reaching into the pocket, he pulls out a polaroid photograph. It was taken in the backseat of some kind of van. Jason is slumped in-between Joker and Harley, unconscious. A polka-dotted cloth is tied over his mouth, and his wrists are bound in front of him. Joker has his arm around Jason, laughing hysterically. Harley is leaning over, planting a sloppy-looking kiss on the now uncovered _J _on Jason's cheek.

Batman struggles to keep his emotions in check as he stares at the photograph. Horror and rage mingle within him, and the photograph crumples slightly in his clenching fist.

"Batmanâ€|" Nightwing says quietly. "_Bruce_."

Bruce blinks, looking up into Dick's mask.

"We'll find him," says Dick. "We will."

His jaw tightening, Bruce nods. He stuffs the photograph into a pouch on his utility belt and straightens, a hard glare in his eyes.

"We're getting your brother back," he hisses.
"Tonight."

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Soooo much baseball in this story lol. Some of the older comics showed Jason playing baseball during his days as Robin, and there is a canon picture taken of Bruce and Jason at a baseball field. Hence where this all comes from. It only started out as a small part in the story and it kinda got bigger as it went along. Sorry if it's annoying lol. :3

17. Chapter 17

WARNING: There are some torture scenes in this chapter. Just a heads up.

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Cold. That's the first thing Jason thinks of as he drifts his way back to consciousness. He's freezing. He tries to move his arms, and he realizes that they've been pulled up over his head. His thoughts muddle together in the inky darkness as he tries to remember what the hell had happened.

He hears the sound of shoes clicking on concrete.

"Are you awake yet, little Robin?"

Jason's eyes snap open, and all of his senses slam back into him. Struggling, he lifts his head and glances about him frantically. As his eyesight focuses he sees that he's in some kind of dimly lit factory room. This place is much bigger than the one Joker had originally kept him in, though that is hardly a comfort. There's an odd, grotesque smell lingering in the air, like old musk and decaying filth mingling together. Jason tries to move his arms, but they've been tied above his head to a pipe running along the center of the room; he can't feel his fingers at all, or really anything past his elbows. His feet barely touch the floor, and Jason desperately scrapes at the concrete below with his toes, trying to steady himself.

Both his shoes and sweatshirt have been stripped from him. His t-shirt clings to his sweat-soaked body, the dampness of it making Jason shiver. Lifting his gaze, Jason watches as the Joker casually strolls towards him. Panic flares up in Jason; the last time he had been strung up like this, Joker had branded his face.

"Goodness, you were out for a long time," the Joker comments. "I was getting worried."

Jason just glares at the Joker. Smirking, the Joker runs his hand over a worktable pushed to the center of the room, not ten feet away from where Jason hangs. Jason's eyes follow Joker's hand, and fear begins to pool in his stomach. Surgical tools, mechanical equipment, and other things Jason doesn't really want to get a closer look at are spread out over the wooden surface, illuminated by a naked light

bulb hanging from the ceiling. Joker taps his fingers against the different tools, considering. Then he plucks a crowbar from the table.

"For the first few months, you were so sure that Daddy Bats was going to come and save you," Joker says, tapping the crowbar against his upturned palm. "It's a miracle he even decided to show up at all. Do you think he'll bother a second time?"

Jason grinds his teeth, fury coursing through him.

Joker shakes his head with mock sadness. "You know, they say that the middle child is the one who always gets forgotten in the family." He chuckles. "I suppose it's true with yours."

Jason can't help himself. "He'll come," he hisses. He has to — Bruce promised he would keep him safe. He promised. Then he shakes his head. No. He had done this to protect them. He has to bear this on his own.

Joker laughs darkly. "I doubt it. But don't be so distraught, Bird Boy." He edges nearer to Jason. "You and I will have plenty of time together." He swings the crowbar in a slow circle and looks up and down Jason's body, as though deciding where would be best to strike first. He leans in close. "Ready for round two?"

Jason spits in the Joker's face.

For the tiniest instant, a spark of rage flashes in Joker's eyes. But then it's gone, and Joker simply pulls out a purple handkerchief to wipe his face, looking mildly amused. "No manners," he mutters. He lets the handkerchief drop to the floor with a sigh, and raises the crowbar. "I suppose it's up to me to teach you some."

Letting out a low laugh, Joker slams the crowbar into Jason's side. Jason's body swings back from the hit, pain flaring from where it the metal struck. Jason bites his lip, refusing to scream. He's struck again, across his raised arms. And again, against his still-healing right hip. There's a horrible crunching sound, and the pain is so sudden and overwhelming that this time Jason does cry out.

"That's what I like to hear!" Joker chuckles. "Come on now, don't hold back! I certainly won't!"

The crowbar comes down again and again. With each strike, Jason's resolve wavers even more. Gritting his teeth against the cries being beat from him, Jason tries to bury the pleading thoughts for Bruce to come.

The assault continues, and all Jason can do is fall into a pained oblivion.

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With Nightwing and Robin's help, Batman scours every inch of the baseball field. The only other thing they find are tire tracks leading off the grass and onto a street heading away from the school. They go in that direction, questioning anyone they come across if they had seen a van of some kind pass this way. No one has.

Oracle is called, and she's starts scanning all security cameras in a ten-block radius from Gotham High for anything of use. With every minute that passes, Batman grows more anxious. He can't lose Jason again. He can't leave him to the same fate a second time. He has to find his son. He has to.

"Batman," Nightwing says, jolting Batman from his thoughts.

Focusing, Batman crouches on the rooftop he's perched on. "Go ahead, Nightwing."

Nightwing's voice crackles through the radio. "I'm on Louis Avenue. A coffee shop was just lit on fire. I'm assuming some of Joker's goons are behind it."

Batman frowns. "I'll be right there."

When Batman arrives at the flame-engulfed coffee shop, Nightwing has a clown-faced man pinned to the ground, his Escrima sticks at the man's throat.

"You mean don't know where the Joker is, or you just don't want to tell me?" Nightwing asks as Batman walks up to them. "Because trust me, I can be very persuasive."

The goon glares up at Nightwing. "I ain't got no loyalty to Joker."

Nightwing snorts. "So the make-up job is just a cosmetic choice?"

The man sneers. "Joker's cool, that's all. We ain't working for him."

"So you're simply worthless, lowlife copycats whose only solace is found in the destruction of other people's property and welfare?" Batman growls, stopping at Nightwing's side.

The man's eyes widen at the sight of Batman. "I-Iâ€¦" he stutters. "Look, I told you. I don't work for Joker! We just heard about what happened to Gotham Park Mall and thought â€œ"

"I don't need your pathetic excuses," snarls Batman. Nightwing gets off the thug and Batman wraps a hand in the man's shirt, pulling him up so they're face-to-face. "I need information. Where is the Joker? Anything of use you give me will severely lesson your chances of having multiple broken bones on your way to jail."

The man swallows. Batman throws the man to the ground and slams his boot onto the man's back, holding him in place as he grabs the man's arm. Twisting the arm around, Batman gives it violent a wrench, jolting a pained cry from the man. "Okay!" he sputters. "Okay, okay! Lookâ€¦I haven't heard anything about where the Joker is. But some pals of mine said they saw his bitch, Harley-what's-her-name, hanging around the old factories out by the junkyards. It was after the mall's bomb went off. That's all I know, I swear!"

Batman releases the man's arm; before the man can even manages a sigh of relief, Batman's boot swings in, striking him in the jaw. The

man's head snaps back, and he's out cold. Pure disgust in his eyes, Batman handcuffs the man to a stop sign pole.

"I'm assuming no one else was in the building, since you were occupying yourself with this scumbag?" Batman asks.

"Yeah," answers Nightwing. "It was almost completely evacuated when I got here. I made sure the last of the employees made it out the back exit, and then found this ray of sunshine. I already called the fire department, by the way." As if on cue, sirens begin to echo from down the street. Nightwing turns away from the coffee shop and cocks his head to the side. "Robin?" he says. "Find anything that might be connected to the abandoned factories by the junkyards?"

There's a pause before Robin's voice comes in through the radio. "I think so. Oracle found a purple van on some security footage, parked only four blocks from there. She's checking it to see when it had arrived."

"It parked there forty minutes ago," Oracle's voice cuts in. Her next words tremble slightly. "Batman -- it's them. I'm looking at the footage from when the van first pulled up. There's Joker, Harley --" She sucks in her breath. "And Jason. He's unconscious --" one of Joker's men has him slung over his shoulder. They're heading west, in the direction of the factories."

Batman clenches his fists. "Let's go," he says darkly. Nightwing nods, and they jump into the Batmobile as it's remotely pulled up to where they're standing. "Robin?" Batman asks.

"On my way," replies Robin. "Meet you there."

/

Jason swings slowly from the ceiling pipe, barely conscious. The crowbar has been dropped to the concrete a few feet away, shining with fresh blood. Joker circles Jason, studying the limp boy with a satisfied smile.

"I do love games like these, but they are always so messy," Joker says. He shakes his gloved hand, and a few drops of blood splatter onto Jason's tattered shirt. "Why don't we try something different?" Pulling out Jason's knife, Joker cuts the cords holding Jason up. Jason's body drops to the ground with a hard thud; flinching violently as he strikes the ground, an agonized moan seeps from Jason's lips.

Joker gives a short laugh. "This reminds me of a similar situation between you and me, only a few months ago. I made such a nice addition to your face. But it's been ruined slightly --" it's not nearly as fresh as I'd like it to be." Joker taps the tip of the knife against his chin. "Would you mind? No, of course you wouldn't."

His eyes flickering open, Jason turns on his side and tries to crawl away from the pair of bloody shoes standing before him. He only gets a few inches when Joker kicks him onto his back and grabs his bound hands, dragging him over to the worktable. Snatching a pair of handcuffs off of the wooden surface, Joker attaches one of Jason's wrists to a table leg, stretching the boy's arms out above his

head.

Joker then presses one knee down onto Jason's chest, holding him in place. Normally, Jason would have easily been able to throw the Joker off of him. But in his current condition he knows it isn't even close to being possible. Joker must have broken at least two ribs, and every time Jason squirms Joker increases the pressure on his chest, causing burning pain to flare up within him. So he's forced to lie still, otherwise he risks puncturing a lung.

Looking absolutely giddy, Joker leans over and places Jason's knife against the pink _J_. "Now don't move!" Joker presses the knife into the brand, breaking through the skin and causing blood to dribble down Jason's cheek. Jason immediately jerks in both pain and panic, but is only rewarded with a sharp jab from his chest. Jason hisses as the Joker works, grinding his teeth against the pain. He won't scream. He won't. And he doesn't, not even when Joker's laughter rings in his ears, reverberating off the walls. But the tears that leak from his eyes can't be helped.

Joker finally pulls the knife away, studying his handiwork. "Not bad at all! Now," continues Joker, looking down at the cast encasing Jason's leg. "Why don't we relieve you of that restricting cast? It looks terribly inconvenient. Boys!"

One of the doors to the room opens, and three men come in. Joker smiles at them, beckoning with Jason's knife. "Come, come! We need to get this dreadful thing off the poor kid. He's a little squeamish though, so why don't you all hold him down while I do the hard work. Sound good?"

The men exchange glances, and then come over to the worktable. Two of the men grab each of Jason's legs, and the third holds down Jason's torso, completely immobilizing him. Joker bends forward, holding up Jason's knife with a smile. "Fantastic. Let's begin."

/

Batman and Nightwing jump from the Batmobile the moment it pulls up to the edge of the junkyard. Their senses are on high alert, but the place looks deserted.

"I hope this is it," Nightwing mutters.

Batman narrows his eyes. "Let's go."

Together, they swing their way over the heaps of garbage until they land in a clearing spread out before a set of two factory buildings.

"Alright," says Batman. "Nightwing, you take the roof. I'll go in through the side entrance. When Robin arrives —"

"Here." Robin lands softly on the ground beside Batman.

Batman casts a quick glance at Robin. "Robin, you go in through the second level. We'll search the eastern building first, and then move onto the western one. Take out any hostiles as silently as you can. We don't need to warn the Joker of our presence."

Nightwing and Robin nod and shoot their grappling hooks, launching themselves to the second and top floors of the abandoned structure. Batman runs to the side entrance door; finding it unlocked, he slips inside.

The hallway is dark, so Batman flips on his night vision as he moves along. Old boxes are sacked messily against the walls, and puddles of water from leaky pipes are spread out across the floor. It seems too quiet. Maybe this isn't the place. Maybe â€

A scream cuts through the blackness. Jason's scream.

Panic shoots through Batman and he runs forward, forgetting his intentions of stealth. A door waits for Batman at the end of the hallway. Switching off his night vision, Batman jams his shoulder into the door, slamming it open.

He's in the main room of the factory. It's large, and nearly empty save for some leftover crates lying amongst broken conveyer belts. Only a few lights hanging from the ceiling are turned on, illuminating the horrific scene.

In the center of the room is Jason, handcuffed to a table leg and held down by three men in clown paint. Kneeling over Jason is the Joker, holding a folding knife. Batman's loud entrance startles them all, and they jerk their bodies around to look in his direction, giving Batman a better view of his son.

They're cutting off Jason's cast. Joker has completed most of it already, and chunks of the white plaster lay discarded around Jason's leg. Blood is seeping from deep gashes in Jason's leg, which Batman assumes is from the Joker when he "slipped" while taking off the cast.

Jason doesn't look in Batman's direction. His eyes are half-closed, and his head lolls to the side as the knife is pulled away from his skin.

Joker's eyes light up at the sight of Batman. "Bats!" he exclaims. "My, my, I have to say, this is a surprise! You came for the kid after all!" He claps. "And you managed to find him in under nine months â€" how impressive."

Snarling, Batman lunges at the Joker. The Joker gives a laugh and immediately brings the knife to Jason's throat, stopping Batman in his tracks.

"Now, now, let's not get hasty," says Joker. He presses the knife deeper against Jason's skin, and a drop of blood dribbles down the pale flesh. Jason doesn't move, seemingly unaware of what is even happening.

Batman clenches his fists. "Let him go, Joker."

A short laugh bursts from the Joker's lips. "Why ever would I do that? What do I have to lose? Certainly not my life â€" we both know you're too noble for that." He increases the pressure on the knife, and the drop of blood on Jason's neck turns into a thin trickle. "Even if it's your son's life on the line. Or can he really be called that, when you hardly made the effort to look for him the first

time?"

Batman grits his teeth. "Let him go now, and I'll only break _half _the bones in your body."

Joker laughs. "Ho-ho! Such a violent man, Bats. Very well then; I suppose I knew I'd have to say goodbye to the kid sooner or later. Ah well, there's always other birds flying around." Joker's hand shifts, and in that split second Batman realizes that Joker fully intends to slit open Jason's throat. He frantically reaches for a Batarang, but before he can grab one, something comes whirling through the air, knocking Joker's hand away from Jason.

Everyone's heads snap up to see Nightwing soaring down towards them. Joker's men immediately jump up, raising their hands to defend themselves. Nightwing lands hard into the chest of one of the men, sending him sprawling across the floor. The other two thugs throw themselves at Nightwing with vicious shouts.

A door on the far end of the room bangs open, and fifteen more of Joker's men stream in. But Robin suddenly comes flying at them from above, knocking two of them to the ground as he lands. Having taken care of the two other men who had been holding Jason down, Nightwing rushes to Robin's aide.

"You and your little birds!" Joker laughs. He lunges for the knife Nightwing had knocked out of his hand, but Batman is on him in a second, wrenching him away from both the knife and Jason. Batman slams the Joker into the ground, digging his hands into the front of Joker's suit as he leans over him.

"You will not touch my son again," hisses Batman. "Or I will make it so you will never be able to even lift a finger without horrible pain coursing throughout your body for the rest of your miserable days."

Joker grins up at him. "_Now _you're sounding interesting, Bats." He chuckles. "But in the end, your empty threats don't mean anything; I will _always _find your boys."

Letting out a low growl, Batman punches the Joker in the face. Blood streams from Joker's nose, but all he does is laugh. Batman continues to strike him over and over, rage propelling his every movement. A final punch is laid, and the Joker's head smacks against the concrete, rendering him unconscious.

Pushing himself away from the Joker, Batman turns back to the bloody body handcuffed to the table. "Jason," he whispers.

/

Jason can't focus. Everything is blurry and dim. He keeps hearing the Joker's laughter, but it's distant, like what one would hear at the end of a long tunnel. Pain keeps blazing up and down his leg, burning with every touch, every slice. He thinks he's screaming, but it's hard to tell. All that is running through his mind is fear and agony, and he just wants it to _end_.

Then the hands lift from his leg, and he hears shouts. He can't place the voices at first â€" he's far too dizzy. Something cold presses

against his throat. There's a sharp prick, but he's too weak to move away. His leg is throbbing terribly; it feels as though someone has peeled the skin off of it. He wonders if maybe that's exactly what the Joker had done.

"â€" break _half _the bones in your body."

Shock courses through Jason as the voice breaks through his haze. It can't be. But it mustâ€"it _has _to be. Desperation and hope mix within him, and he struggles to open his eyes. But his body simply won't obey him. He swims in the inky darkness, trying to force himself back to consciousness. Long seconds pass, and then a pair of hands suddenly touch Jason's arms. Fear leaps in Jason and he jerks violently, trying to wrench himself free.

"Jason? Jason, please, look at me! I need you to open your eyes. _Jason!"_

_Bruce. _Terrified that he'll open his eyes and see nothing but a clown's deranged smile, Jason hesitates before slowly opening them. There, crouching before him, is Batman. Tears spring to Jason's eyes, and he can't help the sob that escapes him. Bruce is here. His _father _is here.

"Bruceâ€"|" he whispers tearfully.

Bruce nods, his expression unreadable with the mask on. But the emotion in his voice is more than enough. "I'm here, Jason. It's alright." He leans forward, reaching for Jason's cuffed wrist. "Hold on." The cuffs fall away from Jason, and the rope binding Jason's hands together are cut. A sharp aching takes hold of Jason's arms as Bruce lowers them to his sides.

Bruce carefully lays Jason flat on the floor before pressing a button on his gauntlet that remotely tells Alfred to call for an ambulance. "I need to help Nightwing and Robin," he says. "You're safe here â€" just don't move. I'll be back."

Panic flares up in Jason. "Please don'tâ€"|" he croaks out. _Please don't leave me._

"I'll be back," Bruce repeats. Then he's gone from Jason's line of sight.

_Don't leave! _His thoughts scream. He can't be left again. He _can't_. Frantic, Jason struggles to push himself off of the floor. Agony burns in his body, but his terror of being abandoned a second time is stronger, clearing his head slightly as he manages to push himself onto his elbows.

Men in clown paint lie sprawled out across the floor of the factory. Batman, Nightwing, and Robin continue to fight what looks to be about eight remaining men. Robin is the closest to Jason, currently deflecting the relentless attacks of two thugs.

Out of the corner of Jason's eye a body shifts. Jason turns his head, and horror pulsates through him as Joker starts to pick himself off of the floor. Pulling himself to his feet, Joker turns and smiles at Jason before stalking towards Robin â€" towards _Tim_.

Unable to walk, Jason tries to crawl in Tim's direction. "Robin!" he shouts weakly.

One of the two men Tim is taking on manages to strike him in the jaw, sending him reeling backwards. Tim falls to the ground hard, striking his head against the concrete. Stunned, a groan escapes Tim as he rolls over in an attempt to get up.

Joker rushes forward and delivers a sharp kick to Tim, snapping his head back. Grinning maliciously, Joker kneels over the near-unconscious boy. "Two birds in one night," he chuckles, wrapping his hands around Tim's throat. "It'll be hilarious if I manage to get all three, don't you think?" He squeezes and Tim gasps, clawing weakly at Joker's arms in his dazed state. "If only you Boy Blunders could appreciate humor the way I do."

Joker's back is to Jason, and he and Tim are less than ten feet away. The men Tim had been fighting had left Tim to the Joker, leaving Jason's pathway clear. Desperation blazes through Jason, and he begins dragging himself towards the two. As Jason nears them, he sees Tim's grip on Joker start to slacken. At that same moment, Jason's eyes fall upon Joker's crowbar, lying not two feet from his hand. Throwing himself forward, Jason snatches it up. Using it as leverage, Jason pushes himself to his feet and takes the final step he needs to be in range.

Gritting his teeth against the agony blazing throughout every inch of his body, Jason swings the crowbar forward, slamming the metal against the back of Joker's head. There's a sickening crack, and Joker freezes; his grip falls away from Tim, and he crumples to the ground.

The crowbar, still slick with Jason's blood, clatters to the concrete. Feeling dizzy, Jason drops to his knees. "Now _that's _funny," he whispers. Then he collapses beside the Joker.

Tim gasps for air, weakly massaging his throat as his eyesight refocuses. Blinking hard, he pushes himself up and stares at Joker and Jason's motionless bodies. "Jason?" he croaks out. "Jason!" Tim crawls over to Jason and pulls him into his lap, shaking him gently. "Jason, come on. Open your eyes! _Jason!_"

Tim hears footsteps racing towards him and he jerks his head around to see Bruce and Dick running towards him, having taken care of the last of Joker's men.

Bruce all but shoves Tim out of the way in order to get to Jason. Jason's eyes flicker as he is transferred from Tim to Bruce, and a low moan emanates from him.

"Jason, you gotta hang on," Bruce says. "The ambulance is coming â€" help is coming."

Jason doesn't catch everything Bruce says to him. Bruce, Dick, and Tim's faces hover above him, out-of-focus and far away, as if one were looking at them through a foggy window. He coughs weakly, and blood dribbles from his mouth. His entire body is in on fire and Jason just can't take it anymore. He wants it to end. He wants to be done with it all â€" with the pain and the fear.

"Jason?" Dick is speaking now, but Jason is having a hard time understanding him. Gentle fingers sink into Jason's hair, comforting him. "Jason, stay with us."

Tears leak from Jason's eyes as he hazily looks up at the three faces leaning over him. His _father _and _brothers _are here. They came for him. _They came for him._ He lets out a sob, but then he chokes and coughs instead. More blood splatters from his mouth onto his lips.

A strong hand slips beneath Jason's head, cradling it. Jason feels a forehead press against his own, and Bruce's voice is in his ear, a hushed whisper. "You're going to be alright, Jason. Stay with me, son."

No, he's not going to be alright.

He's not.

Jason no longer can piece together a coherent thought. All he knows is that if he falls into the blackness, the pain will stop.

So he falls.

18. Chapter 18

"â€|severe bruising on the arms, legs, and torsoâ€|"

"â€|at least two broken ribsâ€|"

"â€|massive blood loss from the legâ€|"

"â€|to the ICUâ€|"

"â€|call Bruce Wayneâ€|"

/

Pain.

Sharp, suffocating.

It embodies him, enwraps him in its clutches.

He can't breathe.

He can't speak.

â€|he thinks he's dying.

/

There's a low beeping. It's steady; Jason counts two seconds in-between each beep. For a long while, all he can focus on is that repetitive sound, seeping its way to him in the blackness. Jason frowns. What the hell is it? He can't concentrate â€" everything feels fuzzy, and the surrounding darkness is smothering.

"â€|doctor saysâ€|"

"â€|recoverâ€|"

"â€|when heâ€|"

Fragments of undiscernible voices ink their way to Jason through the haze. They sound so familiar, but he can't quite place them.

"â€|need to stayâ€|"

Bruce. Bruce is here. That thought gives him strength, and he struggles further; slowly, the sounds of wherever he is start to sharpen.

"â€|waking up!"

"â€|Jason?"

Blearily, Jason opens his eyes. He's in a hospital room. His eyelids droop, threatening to close again as he stares at the white wall across the room from him. Blinking heavily, Jason shifts his gaze around until it falls on three figures leaning over him.

"Bruâ€|" It's exhausting to even say half the name. He breathes deeply, trying to shake the drowsiness.

Bruce reaches out, grasping Jason's hand. "I'm here, Jason. You're alright â€" everything's okay now."

Jason's eyes flicker from Bruce to Dick and Tim. There's some dark bruising around Tim's neck, but other than that they all seem okay. They're _safe_. Relief encompasses his thoughts and Jason swallows, trying to rid himself of the lump in his throat.

Dick moves closer, brushing back Jason's hair. "The doctor says you'll be fine, Jay."

Jason tries to speak, but he can't; he can't even open his mouth. His body feels like it's made of stone â€" everything is so heavy. What the hell is wrong with him?

"You got out of surgery only four hours ago. Right now you're on some pretty strong pain medications," Bruce says. "You probably won't be able to stay awake for much longer, but you'll be more coherent in a few hours."

Jason nods dimly.

"Just rest."

Jason thinks Bruce says something else after that, but he doesn't catch it. The darkness closes in, and with Bruce's hand wrapped around his, Jason welcomes it without fear.

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Jason sleeps for eight more hours. When he wakes the second time, Dick and Tim are sitting at a small table in the room, playing chess. Bruce is in a chair pulled up to Jason's bedside, reading Jason's copy of _Les MisÃ©rables_.

Upon hearing Jason shifting, Bruce looks up and sets Jason's book on the hospital nightstand. Jason's eyes flutter drowsily for a moment, and he draws in a long breath as he glances about him. His gaze falls on Bruce, who watches him with concern.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

Jason swallows, trying to wet his mouth to speak. "Fineâ€¦I guessâ€¦" he mutters.

Realizing that Jason is awake, Tim kicks Dick's shin and nods his head in Jason's direction. The two of them abandon the chess game and pull their chairs over to Jason's bed.

"Hey there," says Tim.

Dick grins. "Glad you finally woke up," he teases gently. "Took you long enough."

Jason tries to return the smile, but he's still working on getting back to full consciousness. _Damn, these drugs are intense._ He shakes his head and his eyesight sharpens a bit more.

"Whereâ€¦are we?" he asks, his voice hoarse.

Bruce reaches for a glass of water that had been placed on the nightstand. He holds it to Jason's mouth, who â€" despite being rather embarrassed at needing help for something as dumb as holding a glass â€" is grateful as he thirstily gulps down the water.

"Gotham General Hospital," Bruce says.

The water had been a savior. With the rawness in his throat soothed, Jason's voice sounds much more normal when he speaks next. Shaking his head to clear it, Jason sits up slightly. "What about Dr. Leslie?"

"She's been out of town all week," says Bruce. "We needed to get you somewhere fast."

"Luckily, Batman had called the ambulance early on in his rescue of Bruce Wayne's kidnapped son," Dick says. He winks. "Nightwing and Robin were pretty helpful too, from what I hear."

Feeling more alert, Jason rolls his eyes. "So that's the story we're going with?" he asks, speaking a little slower than usual due to the drugs. "The bland kidnap-the-billionaire's-kid thing?"

"Works for me," Tim says with a grin.

Jason gives a short laugh. Then he sobers, and his hand brushes against his bandaged left cheek. "Well, I guess now we don't have to worry about finding a cover story for this," he mutters.

Dick and Tim exchange uncomfortable glances. His expression pained, Bruce reaches out and lays a hand against the side of Jason's head. "It doesn't matter," Bruce says softly. "You're safe, and that's what is important."

Jason looks away, closing his eyes for a moment. When he opens them, he moves his gaze to the lump of bedsheets under which lies his newly re-cast leg. "So how bad is everything else?"

Bruce studies Jason's face for a moment before answering. "You have two broken ribs, and had had some pretty severe internal bleeding around the abdomen. You went into surgery only minutes after they brought you to the hospital, and fortunately they were able to stop the bleeding quickly."

Jason nods. "And my leg?"

"Joker hadn't had time to damage the bone further," Bruce says. There's a dark edge to his voice that Jason doesn't miss "though he's fully aware it isn't directed at him. "There's some deep lacerations though. The doctors cleaned and sewed them up, and then re-cast your leg. I know you were originally supposed to get the cast off in three weeks, but now it's going to be at least four, maybe more."

Jason groans. "What about my hip?"

Bruce hesitates. "Jason, your right hip it hadn't fully healed before this happened. It it was completely shattered this time." He pauses, unease on his face. "They had to replace it with an artificial one."

Jason stares at Bruce in shock. "What?" He chokes out. "Will I he's terrified to ask. "Will I still be able to you know? Do what I did before?"

"We think so," Bruce says carefully. "But your right leg has taken a lot of damage over the past eleven months. It's going to be hard to do the same things on it."

Panic rises in Jason. "But, with physical therapy"

Bruce lays a hand on Jason's arm. "I'm not saying it's impossible. I'm just saying it won't be easy; it won't ever be as easy as it was before."

Jason nods, trying to stay calm. Bruce gently squeezes Jason's arm. "But I don't want you worrying about that right now. You just need to focus on healing."

"I already did that for two months," Jason says, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Bruce grimaces. "I know. But you can do it again."

"We'll be here with you the whole way," says Dick.

Jason bites his lip, looking unconvinced. Bruce runs a hand through his hair with a sigh. "Jason, what were you thinking? Why on earth would you leave the Manor?"

Three pairs of eyes are burning into Jason, and Jason suddenly wishes he were anywhere else at the moment. Heat rises up his cheeks, and he glances away. "his voice is small. There's a long pause. "couldn't let him hurt you," he whispers.

Bruce's eyebrows draw together. "What?"

Jason looks back at Bruce, tears welling in his eyes. "Bruce, I told the Joker my _name_. He would've come to Wayne Manor, and any of you could have been hurt â€" because of me. I couldn't stay."

Bruce presses his lips together, guilt and remorse mixing with him. "Jason, I would have kept you safe â€" we all would have. Regardless of any danger to ourselves. It doesn't matter what the Joker made you tell him; we protect each other." He frowns slightly. "But if you pull a stunt like that again, you'll be living in the smallest guest room in the Manor, with no elevator to the cave."

There's a touch of humor to the last words, and despite himself, a small smile spreads across Jason's lips. Bruce leans forward, stroking Jason's hair back. Then he stands and looks at all three boys. "I need to talk to Commissioner Gordon; he's been asking after you, Jason. I shouldn't be gone very long."

As soon as Bruce is gone, Dick and Tim move closer to Jason's side. Jason's eyes fall on Tim's neck and his grimaces. "Tim? Are you okay?"

Tim smiles softly. "Yeah. Just a concussion and some bruising â€" nothing big."

Jason gives a weak laugh. "Nothing big. Right."

Tim bites his lip. "Thank you," he says, the sincerity heavy in his voice. "You saved my life."

Feeling embarrassed, Jason just shrugs. His gaze hardens as he presses his lips together. "I'm guessing Joker is back in Arkham?"

Dick's jaw tightens. "Yes."

Jason shakes his head. "He'll only get out again."

Dick frowns; not at Jason, more at the truth of what he said. "If he does, we'll take care of it."

"Yeah, but not before he kills someone. Or comes after us again."

The look Dick gives Jason is one of seriousness, determination. "And if that happens, we'll be ready."

Jason gives an exasperated laugh. "Right."

Dick and Tim exchange uneasy glances. His movements cautious, Dick reaches out and places a hand on Jason's arm. Jason doesn't move to brush him away; he simply stares down at his injured leg, deep in his thoughts.

After a while Bruce returns with dinner. Together they all sit around Jason's bed, eating and talking for a long time. But all too soon it's time for patrol, and Bruce glances in Tim's direction.

Jason doesn't miss the look. "It's alright," he says quietly. "I know you need to go."

Bruce turns back to Jason, his words hesitant. "Jason, if you feel more comfortable â€"

"Trust me, there are people out there in far greater need of help than me," Jason says.

A hint of pride at Jason's words flickers across Bruce's face. "If you're sure then."

Jason almost rolls his eyes. "Yeah. Just go."

Bruce beckons to Tim, who gives Jason and Dick a small wave before following Bruce out the door. Dick turns back to Jason and takes the chair Bruce had been sitting in. "I'm not going back to Blådhaven for a few days," he says. "So I guess you're stuck with me."

"Joy," Jason mutters, though the sarcastic humor is not lost on Dick.

Dick grins. "You wanna watch some bad crime dramas?"

Jason laughs. "I guess there's nothing else to do, so sure."

Ten minutes into the show, Dick glances over at Jason. Jason isn't even watching the TV; his eyes stare at the far wall, shadowed by that haunted look Dick had seen in them after Jason's panic attack.

"Jason?" Dick asks gently.

Jason doesn't answer at first. He blinks, and suddenly looks more exhausted than Dick has seen him all day. He lets out a low breath. "I'mâ€¦I'm so tired of being broken," he whispers.

Dick's heart aches at the words. He reaches out and grabs Jason's hand. "You are not broken," Dick says. "A little bruised, a little bent â€" yes. But not broken."

Tears shine in Jason's eyes. Sucking in a long breath, Jason sinks further into the pillows, looking rather small amongst all the bedding of the hospital bed. Dick keeps his hand entwined in Jason's, not letting go even after Jason has fallen asleep.

When Bruce and Tim come back to the room hours later, both Jason and Dick are fast asleep. Still sitting in his chair, Dick's body is curved over the edge of the bed, where his head rests on top of his bent arm. His other arm is sprawled out in Jason's direction, his fingers brushing against Jason's. Tim and Bruce stare at the two brothers for a moment. Then, smiling sleepily, Tim drags himself onto the foot of the hospital bed, letting his feet hang off the edge as he lays his head on his arms. He falls asleep almost instantly. Bruce sits in a chair at the end of the bed, watching his sons for the next many hours.

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****I tried to make it different, but sorry if this chapter feels a bit too similar to past chapters. :/****

End
file.